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## CATHERINE THE GREAT

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THE EMPRESS CATHERINE II

# CATHERINE THE GREAT

BY

GINA KAUS

*Translated by June Head*

*With a Frontispiece and  
13 Half-tone Illustrations*



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# Catherine the Great

## CHAPTER I

### JUST AN ORDINARY PERSON

CURIOSITY is persistently inherent in the human mind, which cannot contemplate or marvel at any phenomenon without demanding at all costs to know how it came about. What are lightning, thunder, ebb and flow? What is personality? What is genius?

This last question was more easily answered in the days when science paused in shuddering awe before the soul of man, and paid homage to a spark of the divine in every human individual. But if man is no more than the child of his parents, then whatever he is, his parents will in some degree have been, and the biographer in his task of analysing personality need do no more than diligently explore the past and endeavour to assemble piece by piece the heritage which it has built up.

There are few characters in history who have defied this academic conception of heredity so successfully as Catherine the Great. Neither the good in her nor the evil, neither her extraordinary intellect, nor her unbridled excesses show her to have been the child of her parents. None of her many characteristics—her despotism, her tolerance, her insane recklessness, her wisdom, her generosity, her ruthlessness, least of all her genius and her depravity—can be traced to any one of her ancestors.

Even during her lifetime people found it difficult to connect the "Semiramis of the North" with the little German princess of Anhalt-Zerbst she was by birth. Russian court gossip named her father as a certain Count J. J. Betzkoy, for no other apparent reason than that he lived in his youth at the Court

of Zerbst, and in later years at the Russian Court, where Catherine treated him with great respect and showed a remarkable indulgence toward his many moral lapses. But even her descent from Betzkoy, who was not an outstanding man, would not explain Catherine's greatness by the theory of heredity—though it might well have explained her viciousness. If Betzkoy were indeed her father, then Catherine's mother must, at the age of sixteen and within a few months of her marriage, have deceived her husband, a supposition which would throw a tentative light on one facet at any rate of Catherine's many-sided and glittering character.

A far more satisfactory solution to the eternal riddle of why and wherefore is provided by another legend that was rife during the middle of the nineteenth century: namely that none other than King Frederick II of Prussia was her natural father. Prince de Linge mentions it in his *Memoirs*, the Saxon ambassador to Paris states it as a fact in a letter to Count Sacken, and the German historian Sugenheim, who was by no means addicted to idle gossip, devotes many pages to discussing the hypothesis. There is, indeed, a great deal to be said in its favour. In the first place it lies within the bounds of possibility. Frederick, at that time a dissatisfied Crown Prince, spent a great deal of his time at Dornburg during the period in question, and it is very probable that Catherine's mother did the same. True, no records exist to prove that they met at all frequently or even intimately, but we are repeatedly confronted with the suggestion, particularly on the part of the German chroniclers, that it was primarily to Frederick that Catherine owed her later good fortune, while the Russian historians refer to her mother as "a spy in the service of Frederick of Prussia." And how easily Catherine's genius might be explained by her descent from the brilliant and gifted Frederick! It is a highly fascinating and promising theory, but it has one flaw—it lacks any reliable historical foundation whatever. There is no word of documentary evidence to lift this beautiful hypothesis from the sphere of the possible to that of the probable. Frederick's interest in

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Catherine, and the interest of Catherine's mother in Frederick, were notoriously based on any but romantic grounds—a point which will be discussed at length later.

Whether we like it or not, it must be agreed that Catherine's father was in fact none other than the homely and insignificant Prince Christian August of Anhalt-Zerbst, a scion of the Zerbst Dornburg family, one of the dozens of minor princes who lived in Germany at that time. Christian August differed in no way from the rest of the members of his family, which he could trace back to the fifteenth century; like them he was a typical Junker, with no outstanding virtues or vices, moderately ambitious, and unassumingly pious; like them, he had fought in a number of campaigns in his youth, had proved himself to be a good soldier, keen and conscientious in the performance of his duty, but had never contrived to distinguish himself by any deed of conspicuous valour. Nothing happened to halt or hasten his career as a dutiful and reliable servant of the Prussian soldier-king, Frederick William. At the age of thirty-one he became commander of the eighth Anhalt-Zerbst regiment of infantry stationed at Stettin, and soon afterwards was made governor of the city. Basking in the mild favour of his overlord—who in private was in the habit of referring to him as the Prince of "Zipfel-Zerbst" (an allusion to his caution)—and the enjoyment of a sufficient if not princely income from his small estate, he married in the prime of life a Princess of his own rank, and became a model father and husband.

His wife was a woman of infinitely more complicated character, though this was only to become apparent later, for at the time of her marriage Johanna Elizabeth was barely sixteen. She was the fourth daughter of the Prince of Holstein Gottorp, and had grown up at the Court of her uncle, the reigning Prince of Brunswick. The Court of Brunswick was at that time the largest in Germany, far outshining in magnificence and pretension that of the miserly Frederick William in Berlin. But Johanna Elizabeth was only a poor cousin; all

she could boast was her exalted relationship, and of this she made the most possible use. She had an excessive sense of family pride, and spent most of her time keeping up family connections by means of a copious correspondence and personal visits.

She boasted a twofold, though in each case a tragic connection with the Imperial house of Russia: her cousin, Frederick of Holstein, had married Anna, the younger daughter of Peter the Great, who died shortly after the birth of their son Peter Ulrich, and Johanna's own brother had been betrothed to Anna's older sister, Elizabeth Petrovna, but had died of small-pox in Petersburg a few weeks before the marriage was to have been celebrated.

A few days after his wedding, on November 12th, 1727, we find Christian August writing to the Czar Peter II in the following strain:

IMPERIAL HIGHNESS,

May you, in your world-renowned magnanimity, not take it ill that I venture to inform you with the most humble respect that on the eighth of November, after previous betrothal, I married the youngest sister of the Bishop of Lübeck recently deceased in Petersburg, the Princess Johanna Elizabeth of Holstein Gottorp, in the country seat of Weheln in Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel.

This letter is typical of Christian August's simple and clumsily deferential style. Johanna, like most ladies of her century, wrote with far more flourish and eloquence. Yet one may not be far wrong in assuming that it was she who inspired the letter. It would be characteristic of Johanna to think of keeping up her Russian "connections," whereas Christian August had eyes and thoughts only for his German king.

Eighteen months later—on the twenty-first of April 1729—Johanna gave birth to a daughter who was named Sophie Auguste Fredericke in honour of her three living aunts. There is, curiously enough, no document in existence recording this

event. The church register of Stettin makes no mention either of the birth or baptism of the little Princess of Zerbst. Was there, after all, a mystery surrounding that birth? The true explanation probably lies in the carelessness of some official, who could not guess that the names he had forgotten to enter in the church register were those of a future Empress. Incidentally their owner was later almost to forget them herself. It was not until she reached her sixteenth year that she received the name by which she was to become immortal: Catherine.

Her birth was a grievous disappointment to her parents, who, not unreasonably, had longed for a son. Sons grew up to be soldiers, and there was always a demand for soldiers. The care of a daughter, on the other hand, meant a heavy burden to a poor but aristocratic family. This disappointment was apparently not easy to overcome; the unwanted daughter, at any rate, was constantly reminded of it, and forty-two years later began her *Memoirs* with the words: "It was told me that I was not so very joyfully welcomed. . . ." A reproach against her parents can be plainly read in these words. "My father, however, showed the more satisfaction of the two," she continues, thus casting the onus of blame upon her mother.

Her reproaches were justified. From the very beginning Johanna Elizabeth showed an almost pathological lack of affection for her first-born child. There were, of course, a number of excuses in her favour. To begin with, she was still absurdly young—barely seventeen—when her child was born, and she had her own, still unfulfilled demands on life. Accustomed to the luxury and distractions of the Brunswick Court, life in the narrow provincial world of Stettin, at the tiny Court of Zerbst, seemed unspeakably dull and dreary. The income yielded by the little principality was a small one; moreover Christian August was a man addicted to rigid economy, while his young wife yearned for all the things that money could buy. It must obviously take any woman a year

or two to become adjusted to a husband more than twice her age; Johanna was a vital, pleasure-loving girl unused to the ways of a taciturn, puritanical soldier, and it was during this critical period of mutual adaptation that Sophie was born, condemning her mother to months of ill-health, and turning out on top of it all to be a girl.

To say that the first cry of a newly-born infant involuntarily wakens the physical response of mother-love is a pious superstition. Johanna Elizabeth's case proves the fallacy of such a belief. She was not prepared for motherhood when she carried Sophie in her womb; she had no maternal feeling for the child, either at its birth or afterwards. She neither nursed it, caressed it, nor paid it any attention; it remained foreign and vaguely inimical to her, a creature to be handed over first to a wet-nurse and then from one governess to another. She rarely spoke to the child, and when she did so it was for no other purpose than to reprimand or find fault with her.

Sophie herself, of course, only learned from hearsay of the mixed feelings with which her parents had greeted her arrival in the world. But she was able to judge with her own very immature eyes the joyous welcome that greeted the birth of a son two years later. Her earliest and most vivid recollection is one of bitter resentment at the undeserved favouritism shown to her brother.

"Two years later she (her mother) bore a son whom she loved idolatrously. I was merely endured and was often harshly and violently scolded, often without reason. I felt this without, however, being quite clear in my knowledge."

It is not to be wondered that Sophie hated this unreasonably favoured brother of hers. Her childhood recollections make no mention of any brotherly and sisterly affection, and this could hardly have existed in the circumstances, for their mother kept the boy constantly at her side, petting and spoiling him, while she tolerated her daughter's presence in her apartments for no more than a few minutes each day. The

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*Memoirs* make no further reference to this brother until his death is reported:

"He only lived to be thirteen, and died of spotted fever. It was not until after his death that they learned the cause of an illness which had compelled him to walk always on crutches, and for which remedies had been constantly given him and the most famous physicians in Germany consulted in vain. They advised that he be sent to the baths at Baden, Teplitz, and Karlsbad; but he came home each time as lame as when he went away, and his leg became smaller in proportion as he grew. After his death his body was dissected, and it was found that his hip was dislocated, and must have been so from his infancy."

This astoundingly cold and impersonal statement cannot conceivably refer to the loss of a beloved playmate; it merely records the death of a hated enemy whose sufferings had been needlessly prolonged. Twenty years later, in 1779, when she was the all-powerful ruler of the greatest empire in Europe, when not only her brother, but her unjust mother had been relegated to a mortal grave, she wrote to her friend Grimm: "Never would any one more than he have deserved a b . . . o . . . t . . . e . . .: can you guess what? Mamma gave me plenty, when she was in a bad humour, though with scarcely any reason." Neither the death of her childhood rival, nor her own fantastic rise to power could wipe out the memory of those unmerited slights.

Whenever in later years Catherine mentioned her childhood, she did so with the pride of a self-made millionaire, who loves to recall the fact that he went to school in patched boots. She describes the poverty-stricken atmosphere of the Court of Zerbst, the narrow-mindedness of her family, her witless teachers. She never speaks wistfully of her youth, betrays no hint of that nostalgic longing for the vanished joys of childhood which is known even to the great ones of this earth. She was not a happy child.

She knew no tenderness from her parents. The desire to be loved is one of the first and most elementary instincts of

the human soul, just as the demand for air and food is the most elementary of the physical instincts. Sophie suffered from a perpetually unsatisfied hunger for love even before she realized it or was able to put it into words, a hunger that tormented her for the rest of her life, though later she was to know more than her share of love. Nothing could satisfy that longing which, having been born long before she reached womanhood, was to outlive her womanhood and drive her, a toothless crone, even in the shadow of approaching death, to seek love and still more love, to take it in whatever shape or form she found it.

But her early years were entirely devoid of love. Her father she forgave. She grew in time to learn that his rough soldierly exterior concealed a vein of real feeling; moreover, Christian August was a just man, and justice is a quality infinitely satisfying to the childish mind. "I have never known a man more honest in thought and deed than he," she wrote, at a time when she knew dozens of men all of them superior to her father in every other respect. She realized, too, that her father was too much occupied by his official duties to have time for his children. What affection he was able to give them was at least divided equally. But her mother was not just. Her mother had time only for her son. Her mother could be gentle and tender, could whisper endearments, bestow a hundred caresses—on her son. For Sophie she had only an impatient word, a sharp rebuke, a swift cuff on the side of the head.

What was the reason for this singular injustice, for these daily humiliations and slights? We do not know. According to contemporary reports Sophie was a pretty, intelligent child, perhaps a trifle high-spirited, but quick to respond to affection. Might it have been that the sight of her served to remind her mother of some guilty secret? It must be repeated: there is no shred of historical evidence to credit such a supposition. The only evident explanation was the fact that her brother was a boy. It was, at all events, the only explanation Sophie could discover, and one that she was

constantly reminded of. It formed the obligato to her childhood, and moulded her entire character; it was the irritant, round which the pearl took shape: she was only a girl.

But she was a healthy, robust child, gifted with a quick intelligence and a will whose potentialities neither she nor any of those who came in contact with her could guess. Unjustly scolded, humiliated, pushed into the background, she nursed a vast and secret resentment against her mother, against fate, against nature itself. She wanted to be a man, to be as much as and more than any man.

More than a man! That was her earliest and possibly quite unconscious ambition, but it was one which this extraordinary woman never relinquished to the day of her death.

"I was brought up," Sophie said on numerous later occasions, "to marry one or other of the neighbouring princelings." Indeed, what other destiny could she hope for? The great Courts of Europe could be counted on the fingers of one hand, their heirs had the choice of a host of unmarried princesses, though this choice was usually influenced by some political motive, and what possible interest could a reigning European family have in seeking an alliance with the insignificant house of Zerbst?

In order to become a satisfactory wife for a German princeling in the eighteenth century a young princess had first of all to be able to converse and write in French, for in those days the German language was held to be both vulgar and ugly among Germans themselves. She must further have a smattering of music, be able to dance, show a due regard for religion and etiquette, and be modest and unassuming in her manner. That was the ideal to which little Sophie was educated.

A French emigrant, Babet Cardel, was encharged with her upbringing, and she is the only being connected with her childhood of whom Sophie cherishes a kindly and grateful memory. "She had a noble soul, a cultured mind, a heart of gold; she was patient, gentle, cheerful, just, consistent—in short the kind of governess one would wish every child to have had."

Whether Babet Cardel really possessed all these virtues, or whether Sophie's judgment was influenced by a desire to contrast her with her mother is immaterial. One thing is certain: she gave the child what her mother denied her—time, attention, encouragement, and a sense of loving security. Within a few weeks the suspicious little girl was won over, she was no longer obstinate and rebellious, she lost her sulky reserve, and began to show the healthy response of an affectionate and grateful nature. In 1776 Catherine wrote to Grimm:

One cannot always know what children are thinking. Children are hard to understand, especially when careful training has accustomed them to obedience and experience has made them cautious in conversation with their teachers. Will you not draw from that, if you please, the fine maxim that one should not scold children too much but should make them trustful, so that they will not conceal their stupidities from us? To be sure, it is much easier for the schoolmasters to develop the spirit of a ruler than to govern their classes in this way.

Whether the Cardel really knew the plays of Molière and Racine by heart, whether it was she who implanted in Sophie that love of the classics which was to mean so much to her later on, must remain an open question. More important is the fact that she took the little Princess into the town gardens and allowed her to play there with the children of simple citizens. One of these was later to recall how at that tender age Sophie already displayed an unusual talent for organization, loved to issue commands, and showed a particular preference for games that were usually only played by boys. But though this fits well enough into the picture we have made of Sophie's early days, such remembered incidents and judgments often prove unreliable.

For the rest, the little Princess's tutors were an undistinguished set, both as men and scholars. Her writing-master would pencil a row of letters which Sophie was made to go over in ink, and her dancing-master set her on a high table to

practise curtsies and steps. Nevertheless she learned in time both to write and to dance. She had no ear at all for music, to the end of her life it remained "a tiresome noise" as far as she was concerned. She greatly enjoyed, however, drawing the pastor who was sent to teach her the Protestant religion into lengthy disputes, and even if she refrained from using all the arguments which her subsequent attachment to the works of Voltaire indicate must have lain in her mind, she used to contradict him freely, only to be scolded by Mademoiselle Cardel for being what that good lady called an "esprit gauche." These are the only sources of mental stimulation we can discover during this early period of Sophie's development.

There was one point on which Johanna Elizabeth personally supervised her daughter's education: though she herself made no virtue of modesty, she did everything in her power to instil that virtue into Sophie. The child was repeatedly told that she was a person of repulsive ugliness, was forbidden to express an opinion unless asked, and was made to approach all the ladies who visited the house and respectfully kiss the hems of their skirts. This was all the more extraordinary since no one at the Court of Zerbst paid much attention to etiquette, and even at Courts where a strict degree of formality obtained it was not the custom for Princesses to pay respect to their inferiors. This whim of Johanna's was born of her love of domination and her desire to crush the girl's eager, budding spirit, to "drive the devil of pride out of her."

But Sophie's pride was a very individual thing. It was so deeply engrained, so securely anchored to a sense of innate strength, that she was never particularly concerned by it; indeed, she made so little show of it that she seemed almost to have no pride. She submitted to her mother's dictates without a murmur, dutifully kissed the dusty trains of the visiting ladies, and never varied her attitude of assumed respectfulness toward her mother herself. This may have been construed as a lack of assertiveness, or as weakness, but in later years it was to be recognized as a deliberate policy, to which she adhered throughout all the trials and difficulties of her

life, even when she was at the height of her power. In time she recognized its usefulness herself, and employed it whenever she was in danger of defeat; she would never find better tactics than meekness, submissiveness, and deference, with which to outwit a personal enemy. She first discovered this weapon at the age of seven or eight, when she was in daily conflict with her capricious mother. It is possible that Mademoiselle Cardel helped her more than she knew. The Cardel's character had been shaped by her own experience; a woman of gentle birth, she had accepted a position of inferiority and still contrived to keep her self-respect, her pride, her even cheerfulness. Perhaps she succeeded in imparting something of the age-old French heritage of the art of living to the little German princess.

She was assisted in this by the natural adaptability of the child herself. Sophie had a positive and determined character, she welcomed everything that was agreeable in life, responded readily to friendship, was eager to learn, and had a natural capacity for forgetting whatever was sad or unpleasant. She was not a happy child, but she was undoubtedly cheerful. This is no contradiction in terms. Her unhappiness had an external source—namely, the lack of family love—her cheerfulness, on the other hand, was a private possession that sprang from the vigour of her healthy young body, and the curiosity of her lively mind. As yet both body and mind were denied opportunities for development; in the eighteenth century little girls did not practise sport, and the dry lessons of her secular and religious mentors provided poor food for a mind teeming with speculations about life and the future. What outlet then had the bubbling vitality of this ten-year-old child? Games in the park and walks with her governess were not enough; moreover Mademoiselle Cardel never left her side, even at night, save for the most needful purposes. Sophie invented a game to make the most of those few minutes of freedom; she ran down and up the four flights of palace stairs and was back on her chair, demure and composed, by the time Mademoiselle Cardel returned. And in the evenings,

when Babet, believing her charge to be peacefully asleep, had settled down to gossip with the Court ladies in an adjoining room, Sophie would sit bolt upright on her pillow and pretend that she was astride a horse, galloping fast and furiously until her strength was exhausted.

Very often Sophie accompanied her parents on their travels. As well as being a custom of the day, it was considered advisable to let as many people as possible know that a well-mannered little daughter was growing up at Zerbst. The real motive behind these frequent journeyings was Johanna Elizabeth's restlessness: an attractive, spirited woman, not yet thirty, she could never endure the monotony of life at Zerbst for very long at a stretch. First she would betake herself to the glittering Court of Brunswick, where there was a hunting party, a picnic, or an opera performance every day of the week; then to Hamburg, where her mother kept an elaborate establishment; and each February at Carnival time she paid a visit to the Court of Berlin, since she felt it was the duty of a woman of her position to wait on the king and the royal family at least once a year.

The chief benefit which Sophie derived from these journeys was that she soon began to realize the petty narrowness of life at Stettin and Zerbst, and to notice that her mother, all-powerful at home, became in more polished circles nothing but a very ordinary provincial lady, while her father, the Governor, was merely a vassal of the Prussian King.

On one occasion, returning from Hamburg, they stopped at Eutin to visit Johanna's brother, the Bishop of Lübeck, who after the death of Karl of Holstein had become Governor of Kiel. He had brought with him to Kiel his ward, the eleven-year-old Peter Ulrich, grandson of Peter the Great. There was every reason why the Bishop should have devoted particular care to the boy's upbringing, since he was first heir to the throne of Sweden, and held a further, if for the moment less hopeful claim to the crown of Russia. But the task of educating the young can often be a tiresome one, and the

girl who was later to unite the political genius of a Caesar with the licentiousness of a Messalina: "In her youth I noticed in her only a serious, calculating, and cold intelligence, which was as far removed from anything distinguished or brilliant as it was from error, eccentricity, and frivolity. In a word, I thought her just an ordinary person."

This lady's judgment deserves full credit, for she resisted the temptation of colouring her original impression by her knowledge of later events. Sophie was no prodigy; at the age of thirteen and fourteen she showed no signs of any exceptional tendencies either toward greatness or depravity. She was simply a normal, healthy being with boundless potentialities. Circumstances alone changed the little Sophie into Catherine the Great, she herself contributed nothing save her iron will, her burning ambition, and that which the Baroness von Prinzen, her mother's lady-in-waiting, shrewdly recognized but clumsily expressed as her "calculating and cold intelligence." A cold, calculating intelligence may be useful enough in little ventures, but it leads its owner to no dizzy heights; to achieve those an impetus of a vastly different nature is necessary. What Sophie possessed, and what most people who do not possess it are apt to call cold and calculating intelligence, was a sense of reality, a capacity for recognizing facts, facing them, and making the best of them. She proved this early in life by her attitude toward her mother: sensitive as she was to injustice, she immediately realized the futility of resistance in a situation where power was unequally distributed. Frederick the Great had to pay far more dearly for this same realization in his relationship with his father.

For Johanna Elizabeth, too, these years were full of bitterness and disillusion. She could not reconcile herself to her lot as the wife of the worthy but excessively dull Christian August. Why, she demanded, could they not move to Berlin, establish themselves near the Court, where at any rate there were interesting people to meet, distractions to be found, and where her husband might improve his position? Christian

August was of a different opinion. His ancestors had all been content to enjoy what their modest lands brought in at home, he had no mind to embark on an adventure that promised no sure reward but only extra expense. What guarantee had he that he could improve his position at the Court of Berlin? Johanna Elizabeth knew as well as he did that there was none. If she had been the person concerned, it would of course have been a very different matter. She firmly believed herself to possess all the qualities that go to the making of a "great woman"—shrewdness, tact, wisdom, and worldliness. And these dazzling gifts were to fade unseen in the provincial obscurity of Zerbst!

In 1740 King Frederick William died. Johanna knew just how it behoved a lady of royal rank to act under such circumstances; since she regarded herself as a member of the Berlin Court, she ordered a mourning gown, and did her best to encourage the other ladies of Stettin to follow her example. But they were not at all impressed, they considered Johanna's behaviour to be entirely lacking in taste, and their gossip eventually reached Berlin. When Johanna arrived at the Court to pay her respects to the new king, an explanation was tactfully demanded of her. She glibly denied the rumours, declaring them to be a spiteful slander invented by her enemies. All the same she did not see the king: he had other matters to occupy his mind than the women of his family and the affairs of Zerbst; he was preparing for his first Silesian campaign. At the very moment when war was declared Christian August had a slight paralytic stroke, and so lost his first and most promising opportunity of making himself useful to the new king.

Almost simultaneously a piece of interesting news arrived from Russia. Elizabeth, daughter of Peter the Great, had overthrown the Regent Anna and her twelvemonth-old son, the baby Czar Ivan, and had seized the throne for herself. This news filled Johanna with tremendous activity. Elizabeth had been betrothed to Johanna's brother, and rumour had it that she had remained single ever since his death because she could not forget him; moreover Elizabeth was the aunt of

little Peter Ulrich of Holstein, and therefore, if somewhat distantly, a relation of Johanna's. Elizabeth had a soft corner in her heart for the Holsteiners; that was well known, for she often inquired about them.

Johanna lost no time in writing to the new Empress. This time she did not entrust the task to her slow-witted husband but penned the letter herself, and made a far better job of it than he could have done. It was a fulsome letter, overflowing with good wishes for a long life and a prosperous reign, and it did not remain unanswered. As quickly as the postal facilities of the day would permit a reply arrived. A most fascinating reply. Few things are more charming than for a superior to ask a favour of a subordinate, and this was precisely what the Empress did. She begged for a portrait of her dead sister Anna, which was in the possession of the Princess of Zerbst. One can picture the eagerness with which this request was granted; the very next courier took the portrait of Anna of Holstein to Russia. A few weeks later the Empress expressed her gratitude in truly royal fashion. She sent the dazzled Johanna a miniature of herself set in brilliants, a trinket worth quite twenty thousand thalers. And even that was not enough: Elizabeth of Russia succeeded where all the devotion of Christian August, all the social efforts of his wife had failed, in making Frederick recognize the existence of his faithful and devoted servant at Zerbst. Christian August was raised to the rank of Field-Marshal.

Soon afterwards there was fresh news calculated to fan the flame of family pride in Johanna's breast. The boy, Peter Ulrich of Holstein, together with his tutor Brümmer, was suddenly called to Russia, where he was received into the orthodox Greek church and formally acknowledged by the Empress Elizabeth as her heir. His guardian, Johanna's brother, the Bishop of Lübeck, was nominated at the intervention of Russia as successor to the Swedish throne in his place.

The new sun from Moscow warmed the Court of Zerbst with its prodigal rays. Johanna could hold her head high.

She had a brother who was a king, and a nephew who was heir to a vast empire; her unenterprising husband, who had at last achieved the rank of Field-Marshal by courtesy of his wife's benefactress, had entirely fallen out of the picture. She was continually racking her brains to find fresh ways of turning the favour of the Empress to account.

In the course of these meditations her eye fell on her daughter. There was nothing remarkable about the child, to be sure, but that was a matter of small moment where political alliances were concerned. Why not make an attempt to play into the hands of fate? Since it amused the Empress to collect family portraits, she would surely be pleased to receive a picture of her young relative at Zerbst. A famous court painter by the name of Paine was living in Berlin at that time. It was his habit to flatter his sitters, and it would surely be an easy matter for him to make a girl of thirteen look like fifteen, to transform a lanky, half-grown stripling into a promising beauty. He could, and he did. Prince August of Holstein took the finished portrait to Russia, and Stehlin, the new tutor of Peter Ulrich, who by this time has been received into the orthodox church and as Grand Duke and heir to the throne of Russia has been given the name of Peter Feodorovitch, wrote: "The Empress is charmed by the expressive features of the young Princess," and added: "the Grand Duke also viewed the portrait not without pleasure."

Since the routine of Court life does not follow the lines of a musical comedy plot, it may safely be assumed that Cupid had no hand in this affair. Johanna had commissioned her daughter's portrait to be painted in order that Peter Feodorovitch might see it, and the Empress had shown it to him so that he might regard it "not without pleasure."

But it was still too early for further speculation. More than a year passed without fresh news from Russia. Life at Zerbst dragged on its accustomed, monotonous course.

Sophie was now fourteen, tall and thin, not exactly beautiful, but of a prepossessing appearance. Her hair was black and

silky, and her eyes dark and bright under a high, well-developed forehead. She was still convinced of her own ugliness and paid no attention to her clothes or her style of hairdressing; she was still Cinderella, overshadowed by her gayer and prettier mother. But she had discovered the secret of making people like her, and she practised this newly-discovered art assiduously. Those who imagine that this future Aspasia began her career by turning men's heads are entirely mistaken. Sophie was anything but a coquette; it was not sexual admiration she wished to attract, but sympathetic understanding. She needed this, hungered for it, demanded it indiscriminately from men and women, old and young, great and small alike. To this end she used means so humble that they appear sublime. At fourteen she had already realized that people prefer to be admired rather than to admire, to talk rather than to listen. Her mother had all the pretentious airs of a woman who thinks herself more than she is—Sophie's manner was simple and natural in the extreme. Her mother fawned on those who were her superiors, was overbearing toward her inferiors—Sophie was equally charming to everyone, to the serving-maids and men, the seamstress, hairdresser, and coachman; she won them all with a smile and a friendly word. As yet she had not read a single line of Voltaire, she hardly knew the meaning of the word "democracy," she exercised her charm almost unconsciously; it was simply the effort of a lonely and neglected child seeking hungrily for kindness. Yet the child had a pride that was singularly her own: it permitted her to shake the grimy hand of a servant, but forbade her to sob out her troubles on the shoulder of a friend of equal station.

Already talk of this or that possible marriage began to crop up around Sophie; an aunt let fall a name, an uncle made a jest. In Berlin, Prince Henry of Prussia danced with her several times, found her agreeable, mentioned the fact to his sister, the Duchess of Brunswick, who passed on the information to Zerbst—and immediately the whole family began

to discuss the possibilities of this quite advantageous alliance with the King's brother. Sophie, too, heard of it. What did she say, or, since no one asked her opinion, what did she think of Prince Henry, and of the others whose names were being whispered?

She knew that it was necessary for her to find the right kind of husband. The right husband—what exactly did she mean by that? Perhaps she cherished a secret dream, an unspoken love for some real or imaginary hero? We cannot tell. We search her *Memoirs* in vain for traces of any youthful infatuation or hero-worship; she seems to have been totally unaware that any such emotion could exist. There is no mention of any man whose real or fancied prowess she worshipped, the sight of whom filled her with a restless fever, whose approach she awaited with eager longing.

Her early youth provides as little evidence of her passionate temperament as of her genius. This woman, who was to become even more famous for her scandalous intrigues than for her statesmanship, whose love affairs were to shock all Europe, whose name—perhaps unfairly—was to become synonymous with reckless lust, who has been the subject of psychological analyses, the heroine of racy operettas and penny novelettes, lived more chastely in her girlhood than the average convent-bred girl of to-day. There was naturally no lack of legends; even during her lifetime stories were current of the affairs she was alleged to have had at the tenderest age, and after her death a tide of pornographic pamphlets and pseudo-historical literature flooded a world eager for sensation and only too ready to believe that the twelve-year-old Sophie, watching the military parades from the castle window, had made secret signs to this or that handsome officer of the guard, inviting him to an assignation that could have only one meaning. These stories, even though they are found in the foremost libraries of Europe, printed on gilt-edged paper and bound in finest morocco leather, are lies and legends. The most famous of crowned courtesans at the age of fourteen was not only an untouched virgin, she

was ignorant even of the normal experience of a youthful infatuation.

What blighted the tender awakening of springtime emotions in this intelligent, precocious and spirited girl? True, she was carefully guarded, and her imagination could scarcely have been stimulated by the sentimental books she was allowed to read, or by her talks with her spinster governess, Cardel. But should a young girl's imagination need any stimulus? And would not the talk of her ripeness for marriage, the mention of this and that prospective bridegroom's name, have been enough to rouse a natural though perhaps vague feeling of desire in her breast?

She had one passionate desire, but she was complete mistress of it. So long as she remained at Zerbst her life was governed by her hidden conflict with her mother; her immediate aim was to end that conflict as speedily and as triumphantly as possible. Since she was an inveterate materialist, she knew there was only one possible way of gaining her victory: she must find a husband who would not only remove her from the scene of conflict but would raise her far above her mother. The man who could do this, and he alone, was the "right husband" for her; she must marry a man who would set upon her head a crown far more dazzling than that of Zerbst. Her real and deepest ambition stretched far beyond this, it reached to the stars, to eternity, to immortality, but her immediate object was to triumph over her mother.

As proof of this we may cite the one and only attempt at a love affair which Sophie had at Zerbst. For a brief moment it seemed as if her warm young blood might obscure the steadfast vision of her ambition; there was a man with whom she exchanged kisses, whom she even promised one day to marry. Was it accident that this man happened to be her mother's brother? "My mother paid very little attention to me at this time. She already saw me as her future sister-in-law." It was the first and last time in her life that she allowed a trifling, convenient vanity to endanger her great and boundless ambition. But was there really any danger? Was Sophie

really prepared to marry George Ludwig, one of the "neighbouring princelings," merely in order that she might become her mother's sister-in-law? It may be. But luck was on her side. Before any final word or action had passed, a very different marriage project loomed up on the horizon.

Sophie was consistently and invariably lucky. She was an unhappy child, and in later life she was again to know frequent and prolonged unhappiness, but she was lucky. This, though it may seem a paradox, is undeniably true.

She was unhappy because she was only a girl—yet only by being a girl could she hope to escape the narrow confines of her provincial life. Had she been born a boy she might have been the cherished darling of her mother, but she would eventually have succeeded her father as the reigning Prince of Zerbst.

Her upbringing was harsh, and designed for an end vastly different from that which it finally served, but it so happened that no other form of education could so adequately have developed those qualities and gifts which were later to become indispensable to her. We know how prospective queens are educated—deprived of a normal childhood, shielded from the faintest breath of reality, fed on ready-made principles and opinions. The little Princess Sophie played in the park with the children of simple citizens, and these games taught her the invaluable lesson of self-reliance. She was far happier playing in the public gardens than at home in the palace with her irritable mother. Later in life whenever she was faced with a crisis she always turned for support to simple people, to servants and soldiers. She would not have been so confident in her dealings with the people if she had been brought up in the belief that she was to rule them.

She was unhappy because her mother was harsh and unjust, but it was fortunate for her that she learned to regard her mother with critical eyes while she was still a child. It will be seen how helplessly she might have been caught in the toils of Russian Court intrigue had she arrived in her second

home full of confidence and reverence instead of in a state of seething rebellion against her mother.

She learnt little enough from her teachers, but her conflict with her mother taught her an invaluable lesson, more useful than any she could have gathered from books. She learnt to hold her tongue, to keep her opinions as well as her feelings to herself; she learnt to endure humiliation without feeling herself humiliated.

Should good fortune now approach her from without, it would find her inwardly most excellently prepared.

## CHAPTER II

### THE BRIDAL JOURNEY

JANUARY the first, 1744. The pious Christian August and his entire family celebrated the New Year by attending divine service in the castle chapel of Zerbst. After lengthy prayers the family adjourned to dinner, and during dinner a courier arrived with a letter for the Princess Johanna Elizabeth. With pardonable curiosity, for such an event was rare in her life, the Princess opened it without delay. The letter surpassed all her expectations. It was from Petersburg, from Brümmer, chief equerry to the Grand Duke Peter Feodorovitch, and the important message it contained ran thus :

At the explicit command of Her Imperial Majesty, I have to inform you, Madame, that the Empress desires Your Highness, accompanied by the Princess, your eldest daughter, to come to Russia as soon as possible and repair without loss of time to whatever place the Imperial Court may then be found. Your Highness is too intelligent not to understand the true meaning of the great impatience of the Empress to see you here soon, as well as the Princess your daughter, of whom report has said much that is lovely. There are times when the voice of the world is in fact no other than the voice of God. At the same time, our incomparable Monarch has expressly charged me to inform Your Highness that His Highness, the Prince, your husband, shall under no circumstances take part in the journey. Her Majesty has very important reasons for wishing it so. A word from Your Highness will, I believe, be all that is necessary to fulfill the will of our divine Empress.

Brümmer enclosed a money order to defray the cost of the journey and provide new wardrobes for the ladies, and closed

his letter with a second exhortation to them to obey the Empress's wishes with all possible speed. He further suggested that the Princess Johanna should travel as far as Riga, where an escort would be awaiting them, under the name of Countess Reinbeck, and that she should keep their destination as far as possible a secret.

No word is mentioned in this letter as to the real purpose of the journey. But Johanna must have guessed it, and if she did not, a second letter, which arrived a few hours later from King Frederick of Prussia, must have removed all her doubts.

"I will no longer conceal the fact," wrote Frederick, "that in addition to the respect I have always cherished for you and for the Princess your daughter, I have always had the wish to bestow some unusual good fortune upon the latter; and the thought came to me that it might be possible to arrange a match for her with her third cousin, the Grand Duke Peter of Russia."

It was, one perceives, a little difficult for the Princess Johanna to know exactly whom she ought to thank. Brümmer and Frederick of Prussia each wanted to claim credit for having instigated the idea of a marriage with the heir to the Russian throne.

It may further be noted that both letters were addressed to Johanna Elizabeth, not to her husband as head of the family, and that Brümmer's letter, despite its polite phrasing, resembled a command passed on from higher quarters rather than a proposal of marriage. Both circumstances point to the fact that in Petersburg, as in Berlin, Johanna's ambition and servility were well known, and that the ruling powers had confidence in her ability to override any objections that her less astute husband might raise. Johanna herself derived only a proud happiness and satisfaction from the contents of these letters. She saw rosy visions of an intimate relationship with the most powerful ruling house of Europe, and she had the added satisfaction of being able to congratulate herself on having cleverly played into the hands of Providence. The good Christian August, on the other hand, refused to be

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reconciled to the thought that his daughter might have to change her Lutheran faith for another. We do not know whether Johanna persuaded him that the marriage could take place without Sophie's conversion, or in what way she managed to overcome his bigoted obstinacy—at all events it took her no more than three days to accomplish the task. On the 4th of January she wrote to Frederick:

The Prince, my husband, has signified his approval. The journey, which at this time of year is an exceedingly dangerous one, holds no terrors for me. I have made my decision, and am firmly convinced that everything is happening in the best interests of Providence.

It was a long letter, but in all its many pages the name of Sophie, the person chiefly concerned, never once occurred. This was no tribute to Johanna's discretion—Frederick himself had mentioned the object of the journey frankly enough in his letter—but simply meant that she felt this affair to be her own personal concern. It was the greatest moment of her life. She was only thirty-one, all her youthful dreams of excitement and adventure, her ambitions, her thirst for fame and power, had remained unfulfilled. After fifteen years of marriage, during which she had borne five children and buried two of them, she still remained at heart a young girl, waiting for "something wonderful" to happen.

And now it had happened. She found herself swept suddenly into the maelstrom of European politics; she was a person of importance, whose decisions were of pressing concern to two great powers. Couriers arrived daily from Petersburg and Berlin. Brümmer exhorted her to speed; the German Ambassador in Petersburg, Baron Mardefeld, besought Frederick II in the name of the Empress Elizabeth to command the Princess of Zerbst to hasten her departure. Johanna sent a message to the Empress saying that "she only lacked wings, otherwise she would fly to Moscow." She did, in fact, by a superhuman effort, manage to make all preparations for the journey within the short space of a week. A glorious week

it was for Johanna, bustling about the unpretentious rooms of the old castle enveloped in a cloud of weighty secrets, gossiping, though of course discreetly, with the provincial aristocracy who would soon enough discover what power she had been secretly wielding.

It never occurred to her that all this commotion was really centred not on herself, but on her daughter. She hardly noticed the girl's existence as she read and despatched letters, gave orders, tried on dresses, and superintended the packing of trunks. Sophie's needs were not consulted. Such clothes as she possessed were packed: three dresses, a dozen chemises, a pair of stockings, and some handkerchiefs. She had nothing new. It was indeed surprising that in the bustle of this strange bridal departure the bride herself was not left behind at Zerbst.

While Sophie's mother thus savoured to the full the crowning moment of her life, her father, to everyone's astonishment, spent hours locked in his study alone. Something was amiss. Christian August, the hardy old soldier, who all his life had known how to face the simple problems that came his way, was now confronted with a situation that baffled him completely. As a father he felt a natural wish to give his daughter, who was leaving him for a new, strange, and dangerously glittering life, all the good advice of which he was capable, but this he knew to be impossible, since the secret of her future must be carefully kept until she was across the German frontier. And so the good man, who had never before penned anything more involved than a regimental dispatch, sat down at his desk and with his tongue between his teeth began to write. In an atrocious hotchpotch of German, French, and official jargon, he composed a list of rules and cautions which might be useful to his daughter at the Russian Court. It was a touching and a ridiculous document. Among other things he conjures her "next to the Empress Her Majesty, to respect the Grand Duke above all as her Lord, Father, and Sovereign; and withal win by care and tenderness at every opportunity his confidence and love. Her Lord and his Will," he adds, "are to be preferred to all the pleasures and treasures

of the world; and do nothing which he dislikes or which causes him only a little pain; and less still to insist on her own will. To regard the domestics and favourites of her Lord with a gracious mien without demanding their services of her Lord or recompensing them, but only to respond to the favour and love of her Lord. To take charge of the pocket money which may be given her, to guard it and pay it out gradually to a servant on account, in order that she might not submit herself to the trusteeship of her underlings and marshalls—always to keep a sum in hand, even at the expense of necessities, but without falling into the error of miserliness." Every line breathes the anxiety of a humble servant to please his superiors. What would have become of poor Sophie if she had tried to establish her fortunes at the Russian Court by following her father's exhortations to meek submission and to the saving of her weekly pocket-money? Christian August spent many days on the composition of this four-page manuscript, which he entitled: "Pro memoria, given my consort to accompany her." And sure enough, as the three of them stepped into the carriage which was to take them to Berlin, Christian August put the sealed packet ceremoniously into his wife's hands, with the instructions that it was to be given to Sophie "when the time was ripe."

How much did Sophie realize as she entered the carriage behind her parents of the real object of their journey? Her own *Memoirs* in this respect are once again contradictory, unreliable, and therefore of little interest. In view of the strict secrecy that had been imposed it was quite likely that nothing had been said to her of the Russian marriage project. Yet it was more than likely that she guessed it. She had seen letters constantly arriving from Berlin and Petersburg; she must have known they contained news of unusual importance. She had seen her mother's brow wreathed in a halo of triumph, and had noticed her father's strange manner. She must, in spite of all concealments, have been aware that this was not one of their usual February journeys to Berlin and, though as usual all the preparations had been for her mother, she

felt that she herself was also in some way concerned. Why should her Uncle Johann Ludwig suddenly have presented her with a length of dress brocade, pale-blue shot with silver? Why was there so much talk of religion? Though the precise moment of Sophie's discovery is doubtful, one thing was certain: she approved of the plan from the first with all her heart.

This was the very thing she had always dreamed of: to get away from home and to scale unknown heights. For her there was no painful breaking of home ties, no tearful leave-taking of brothers and sisters and playmates in the park. Had there ever been a Prince George Ludwig whom she had kissed behind the door and promised to marry when she grew up? That was simply a joke, a childish prank. If he really loved her, as he had vowed a hundred times, could he wish for anything better than her happiness? And was there any greater, truer happiness than the prospect of a throne, an imperial crown? With a lightness of heart that spoke better for her courage than for her heart, Sophie said good-bye to Mademoiselle Cardel, to her home, to all that had hitherto made up her life, and turned her face eagerly towards the new the unknown.

As the stamping of hooves and jingling of bells changed to a steady trot, did she turn her head to take one last look at the old grey walls that had been the home of her ancestors? She would never revisit it, nor any of the scenes of her childhood, nor would she ever regret them.

The following day they were in Berlin. Johanna Elizabeth immediately hastened to the Court—naturally alone. Frederick asked after the Princess, and her mother replied that Sophie was ill. Apart from her desire to keep all the glory of the situation to herself for as long as possible, she had an excellent reason for leaving the girl at home. In the general excitement she had forgotten to have a Court dress made for the prospective bride of the heir to the Russian throne. Two days later Frederick invited the whole Zerbst family to dinner, and this

time Johanna Elizabeth promised to bring Sophie with her. She attached no importance to the King's interest in the Princess, and appeared punctually, in the best of spirits, but without her daughter. This time the King refused to believe the tale of illness, and insisted on Sophie being fetched. There was nothing for it, the embarrassing story of the dress had to come out. The King immediately ordered a gown belonging to his sister to be sent to Sophie, and at last, after keeping them all waiting dinner until past three o'clock, she appeared, her hair hastily dressed, in a gown that had not been made for her, with neither jewellery nor powder, a little shy, but with the light of her first victory over her mother shining in her eyes. For she was the only member of her family who had the honour of sitting at the King's table.

It was only a small, a superficial triumph. As yet Sophie had no very outstanding personality, or at any rate she had not yet learned to express her personality. The King talked amiably to her, without however being particularly impressed by her. And immediately after this small personal triumph she once more became what in actual fact she was—an unsuspecting political pawn.

Her mother meanwhile was being initiated into the political game, and a very active part was assigned to her. Everything was turning out to be on a much grander scale than Johanna had anticipated even in her wildest dreams. She had a private conference with Frederick, and another with his minister, Podiawils. What took place at these conferences is not known.

But to turn to other things: Frederick, as we know, had written to the Princess of Zerbst that "in an endeavour to bestow unusual good fortune on the Princess Sophie" he had conceived the idea of a marriage for her with the Russian heir apparent. This, however, was by no means the truth.

In the first place, Frederick regarded the Russian alliance as anything but a stroke of good fortune. A little over a year previously, Mardefeld, his Ambassador at the Russian Court, had communicated to the King that the Empress wished to marry her heir to Frederick's sister, to which Frederick had

replied that he would under no circumstances permit one of his sisters to go to Russia, and that his Ambassador must break off all negotiations respecting such an alliance. "Alle Discourse von Mariages zu esquivieren und evitieren"—Frederick knew perfectly well what an alliance with Russia meant: a highly uncertain existence, lived under daily threat of Palace revolutions, on a throne that might be seized overnight by a handful of officers of the Guard for the benefit of another aspirant, a continual tacking between party groups whose influence was impermanent—life, in short, on the edge of a precipice. Twenty years later he wrote in his *Histoire de Mon Temps* referring to this alliance which would have served his interests so well: "Malheur à ces politiques qui sacrifient jusqu'à leur propre sang à leur intérêt!" This then was his true view of "the great good fortune" which he claimed to have provided for the young Princess of Zerbst!

In the second place, he did very little towards bringing about that good fortune. For in the letter to the Empress in which he recommended the Princess Sophie he suggested at the same time the names of two Princesses of Darmstadt; at a time, moreover, when Elizabeth's mind was already made up.

This invalidates the widespread historical legend that Frederick the Great founded and cemented the fortunes of the future Catherine in Russia, and invalidates, too, the romantic legend that Frederick not only acted toward the young Princess as a father, but was her father. On the other hand, it is true that the choice of Sophie suited him remarkably well, and this for the following reasons:

Frederick's activities were mainly directed against Austria. Two years previously he had brought his first invasion to a successful issue, but, in spite of the Treaty of Breslau which secured him Silesia, he still felt uncertain of his acquisitions. Fresh hostile entanglements with the Hapsburgs loomed ahead, and the chances of success depended entirely on his having a friendly, or at least a neutral Russia at his back. His relations with the Empress Elizabeth were extremely friendly

at this period. His Ambassador, Mardefeld, had taken part in the conspiracy which three years before had put Elizabeth on the throne, and Frederick had been only too delighted to see a woman "whose sybaritic tastes give one the hope that she will completely lose sight of Europe" occupying that position. He overwhelmed her with flattery; when he sent her his portrait he conveyed with it the message that "he envied the picture, because her beautiful eyes would rest upon it." Elizabeth, being susceptible to flattery, was well disposed toward Frederick, and in 1743 declared her approval of the Treaty of Breslau, which approximated to a guarantee. An alliance between Prussia, Russia, and France, with a common focus of enmity against Austria, seemed to be on the point of realization.

But Elizabeth's policy was not quite so simple. Immediately after her accession to the throne she had placed at the head of her affairs a man whose enmity to Prussia was universally known. This was Count Bestushev-Rjumin, the last protégé of Peter the Great. Peter the Great's objective had been an alliance between Russia, the two sea-powers England and Holland, and the two land-powers Saxony and Austria. This was also Bestushev's objective.

Frederick, whose custom in dealing with affairs of state was to "do everything alone," and who would brook no opposition, must have been puzzled as to why Elizabeth should govern with a Vice-Chancellor whose policy appeared to be diametrically opposed to her own. She must have her reasons for this. What were those reasons? It was impossible to calculate the motives of a woman in authority, and equally impossible to foretell the exact moment when a determined minister might prove more than a match for his mistress, or might lose his head. In any case, Bestushev was a thorn in the side of the Prussian king.

The choice of a German Princess as a bride for the heir to the throne undoubtedly signified a defeat for Bestushev, who had put forward the claims of a Saxon Princess. But why should the Princess Sophie have been brought to Russia with

such secrecy if it were not to spring her arrival as a surprise on the Vice-Chancellor? And if such a surprise move were necessary, then the only explanation could be that Elizabeth was afraid of her own Chancellor, and dared not oppose him openly.

In the course of their private conference Frederick explained to the Princess of Zerbst that it lay in her own interests to do everything in her power to undermine Bestushev's influence, because, as a sworn enemy of Prussia, he would use every possible means of preventing Sophie's marriage in favour of the Saxon Princess of his own choice. He taught her to look at Russian affairs through his eyes, and one can picture the feverish interest with which the ambitious Johanna learned of the dangers that threatened the future aggrandizement of her family. Frederick was a shrewd and clever man but at that moment he stood in danger of forfeiting all the advantages he had gained in Russia. He despised women, and this sweeping contempt robbed him of his judgment and his sense of proportion. He overrated Johanna in entrusting her with such a delicate mission, and he underrated Elizabeth in believing that she would allow herself to be influenced by a few conversations with her new relative. He promised Johanna the Abbey of Quedlinburg for her eldest unmarried sister if she succeeded—succeeded, that is, in bringing about the downfall of Bestushev.

No such bribe was needed to fire Johanna's enthusiasm. This secret mission was the greatest stroke of luck that could have come her way, and it delighted her even more than the marriage plan itself. She had always rated her own intelligence and powers of diplomacy high, and here at last, for the first time in her life, she was given an opportunity of proving herself to be a woman of European significance. She was no longer travelling to Russia as her daughter's chaperon, a mere secondary figure, but as the prime mover in an important conspiracy. She forgot her gratitude, her almost servile devotion to Elizabeth, forgot the injunctions of her worthy provincial husband to take no part in any political or "governmental

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matters"; Frederick, quite unconsciously, had touched and set in motion the mainspring of her character, her love of intrigue.

Forgotten too, of course, was Sophie. She was nobody in any case. In high politics, in the eyes of Frederick, of Elizabeth, of Bestushev, she was not an individual at all, but simply—a German Princess. Her thoughts, her feelings, her character were known to no one and interested no one. Her marriage was to be a union not between herself and Peter, but between Prussia and Russia, a union desired by some and feared by others. Thus, even before she left Germany she had both friends and enemies in Russia, each knowing as much, or as little about her as the other.

On the sixteenth of January—a Friday—they left Berlin at last. In accordance with the instructions of the Russian Empress, the escort of the future successor to the throne was as small as possible, consisting of a lady-in-waiting, Fräulein Kayn; Lattorf, a chambermaid; and three men-servants. The family, retinue, luggage, everything necessary for a journey of several weeks, was accommodated in three coaches.

At Schwest-on-the-Oder, Prince Christian August took leave of his daughter, whom he was never to see again. Sophie wept copiously at this farewell. In those days one wept for far less serious reasons; it was considered a sign of good breeding to shed a few tears on certain suitable occasions, and every well-brought-up girl could cry to order. "But her youth soon conquered this emotion," the Princess Johanna reported in her first letter to her husband. From now on she wrote to him every day, from every post station, in such detail and with such obvious regard for the elegance of her style, that one may be certain her letters were intended not merely for the eyes of Christian August, nor even for the wider family circle, but were penned with an eye to posterity.

They travelled now under the incognito of "Countess Reinbeck and daughter," and in this name they found horses awaiting them at every stage. Nevertheless Johanna com-

plained in all her letters of the discomforts of the journey. And she had good reason to complain. The posting road from Berlin to Petersburg was vile. It was wretched enough in summer, but in winter it was so bad that it was used only by couriers. Occasional and thrifty travellers—for who, in those days, thought of travelling from Berlin to Petersburg?—preferred the sea route. But that would have taken longer, and the Princess had need of haste. She was also unlucky: the snowfall was late that year and they could not use sledges, the heavy carriages bumped over deep, stony ruts or dragged their wheels through bottomless seas of mud. From early morning until late at night, icy winds blew in the faces of the two ladies, so that they were obliged to pull woollen hoods over their heads.

Frederick had given instructions at all the post stages that every possible comfort was to be provided for the "Countess Reinbeck." But there was little enough the wretched officials could do with the scanty means at their disposal. There were, naturally, no good inns on a road so little frequented. In the larger towns and villages it was bearable. There, at least, one found a clean, warm room, a fowl was quickly roasted, a cup of hot chocolate prepared, and what more was needed when one was hurrying on to meet a dazzling future? But in the smaller villages there would be only a single inn, and in this inn—they were already nearing the Russian-Polish frontier—there would be a single gigantic stove in the common parlour. This stove was usually built of a collection of hollow earthenware tiles shaped like ordinary flower-pots, and labourers, serving-maids, peasants, merchants, and whosoever sought shelter from the bitter cold, would take off their boots and stick their feet, stiff with dirt, into the apertures of the tiles. The prospective successor to the Russian crown and her mother, when they landed at such an inn, half-frozen after hours of driving and in no fit state to occupy the icy, unheated guest-rooms, had no choice but likewise to take refuge at the one gigantic stove. The Princess Johanna wrote the following description from Cörlin: "The inn parlour was

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not unlike a veritable pig-sty; the innkeeper, his wife, the watch-dog, the domestic cock, a few children in cradles, a few in beds, others behind the stove on a feather-bed, all lay one on top of the other like cabbages and turnips; meanwhile, as they were all in good health, I had a plank brought for myself and lay down in the middle of the room."

It will be seen that Johanna Elizabeth never failed, even when writing to her husband and her daughter's father, to speak only of herself.

In later years Sophie scarcely recalled the discomforts of this journey, although her feet were so swollen with the frost that she had, on many mornings, to be carried into the coach. She accepted it all without a murmur; quite probably the unusual and exciting aspect of the journey made it seem an amusing rather than a tiresome adventure. She was fourteen years old, thoroughly healthy, full of curiosity and athirst for experience—and she was journeying towards her great, her wonderful good fortune!

All this time the cold was growing daily more intense, they were penetrating farther northwards, but the snow which they so badly needed would not fall. Sledges were tied to the backs of the coaches to be ready in case they should find snow at last, but despite the cutting blasts of the north wind not a single flake fell from the sky; the sledges merely hindered the pace of the journey and gave a grotesque appearance to the little cavalcade. So from morning till evening they bumped over the wretched roads; sometimes the route lay across frozen rivers and lakes, and a few fishermen would be sent in advance to test the firmness of the ice, or they would ford a river by means of a ferry; then the journey would again take on its monotony for hours and days on end. Beyond Memel there were no more post halts. Horses had to be hired from the peasants, and twenty-four of these were needed before they could move from the spot. "The journey is beginning to fatigue me," Johanna Elizabeth complained in a letter from Liebau, and this time she added: "Figchen bears

the fatigue better than I do." This was written on the first of February.

By the sixth they had reached Mitau, six kilometres from the Russian frontier. Here they were able to rest, for a courier was to precede them and announce their arrival. Here, too, the travellers were greeted by the first Russian, a Colonel Voheikov, who on the following day escorted them as far as the frontier. On the road between Mitau and Riga they were met by Simon Narychkin, a former Ambassador, later to become Court Chamberlain, who gave them an official welcome in the name of the Empress. He brought with him a letter from Brümmer, in which that cautious gentleman begged Johanna under no circumstances to forget to kiss the Empress's hand—which "*selon la coutume dans le pays*" Elizabeth would expect her to do.

At about two o'clock in the afternoon they neared Riga, the gateway to Russia, and as though at the touch of a magic wand, a fairy kingdom opened out before their eyes.

Outside the town Prince Dolgorukov was waiting at the head of a detachment of military and civic representatives. The state coach stood in readiness, the ladies stepped in, and as they drove across the Duna, the frozen frontier river, cannons boomed from every fortress and bells rang from every church steeple. In front of the Palace a guard of honour presented arms, guards stood to attention in the entrance hall and at every inner door, bugles and trumpets sounded, drums were beaten, Generals and Marshals bowed to kiss their hands, members of the nobility made obeisance to them, and on all sides, as far as the eye could see, thronged the colourful, gold-bedizened uniforms of the Petersburg Guards.

"I can hardly believe," wrote Johanna, "that all this is for my poor self, who maybe has had a drum beaten in her honour at some place, and at others not even that."

Was it really all for her? The Princess Sophie, although she stood modestly on one side while her mother received

the homage of the fashionable crowd, knew well enough that if her mother had come to Russia alone not a single guardsman would have presented arms. She knew perfectly well that all this firing of cannons, these guards of honour, all this assiduity on the part of the nobility and the army to ingratiate themselves and attract attention, was meant for none other than the future Grand Duchess, the future Empress: for none other than herself. It is not difficult to imagine how Sophie, who at home had been systematically neglected and despised, must have been affected by the immensity of the change, and how eagerly she absorbed all these new and wonderful things. In a single hour she realized how great was the power of a Russian Empress; and in the same hour she formed the iron resolve to win that power for herself—at any cost, *at any conceivable cost*.

While the little frontier town was agog at the magnificent reception of the German guests, and everyone was parading the streets in order to be seen, or at any rate to see something of this rare spectacle, while every eye was fastened on the state coach which held Russia's future Empress, nobody observed the simple carriage, with closely-curtained windows, escorted by a guard of trusted soldiers, that rolled through the gateway of the Fortress. Yet the pale, emaciated woman who sat inside had only three years ago been the all-powerful Regent, Anna Leopoldovna. The same crowd had greeted her with acclamation when she showed herself in public, and in the same churches which were now ringing their bells for the future successor to the throne, prayers had been offered up every evening for the child she held on her knee: the child Ivan, who at his birth had been crowned Czar of all the Russias. Now these two were Elizabeth's prisoners, dragged from fortress to fortress, cut off from all communication with the outside world, and daily trembling for their barren lives.

The prisoners were led unceremoniously into the Fortress where two rooms furnished with only the barest necessities

had been prepared for them. And that evening the Governor of the Fortress, General Saltykov, crossed over to the palace to pay his respects to the future bride of the heir apparent. Could the fourteen-year-old Sophie have had an inkling of the significance of this encounter, which might well have reminded her, standing on the threshold of Russia, of those who had lost that heritage? As she prepared to mount the first step to a throne built on such volcanic ground, was she seized by a shudder at the thought of fortune's vagaries and the fickleness of man? It is unlikely. "Oh world, thy slippery turn. . . ." She asked again and again for the story of how Elizabeth, at the head of a small band of Preobrazhenskyer officers, had marched to the Winter Palace on the night of December 16th, 1741, and seized the reins of power. Her mind was busy with thoughts not of the unhappy creatures, who in a single hour had been hurled from the heights of power of abject misery, but of the victor, with whom in imagination she identified herself. "At the head of a band of officers. . . ." The words rang a never-ending refrain in her head, they were engraved upon her heart.

Johanna Elizabeth's accounts of their first big reception in Riga can still be read. With the petty vanity which characterized her every action, she enumerated the names of those who came to greet her, listing nobles and ladies according to their rank and station, and not forgetting to mention even such persons as had been announced to attend, but for some reason had either turned up late or not at all. One name was missing from the record, and it is with this name that the *Reminiscences* of Karabanov couple an incident which throws an extraordinary light on Sophie's character. It concerns a certain General Braun.

This General Braun, so the story ran, was offended because Sophie, wearied by the journey and the tumultuous reception, had paid him little attention. Hearing of this, she immediately sent word that he might visit her at six o'clock on the following morning. He came, and the two had a lengthy conversation. Astute brains are quick to recognize each other, even through

the artificialities of Court jargon and etiquette. The Princess Sophie took a bold plunge and made use of this first *tête-à-tête* encounter with a high Russian official to ask him for a frank description of the people who played a leading part at Elizabeth's Court. She even gave him pen and paper so that he might write down briefly the failings and virtues, weaknesses and ambitions of the people with whom she would come in contact. She promised to preserve the strictest secrecy and to remember him with everlasting gratitude if he would provide her with genuine and useful information. The General did so, and he was not to regret it later.

The truth of this story has been questioned, on the sole grounds that Johanna Elizabeth forgot to mention the General's name in her letters. But even the most ambitious letter-writer having such abundance of subject matter at her disposal might be guilty of an omission, whereas the story is so perfectly in keeping with Sophie's character that one doubts whether it could have been invented. It reveals all that we know of the little Sophie and a good deal of the future Catherine—her desire to please everyone, to be as far as possible in everybody's good books, which was now developing into an iron determination to assert herself in her new Russian home; her sense of reality which, in spite of the bold flights of her imagination, still longed for facts, for a sober, reassuring knowledge of the truth; and finally her capacity for accepting people, winning them, and making use of them. If the episode with General Braun is not historically accurate, then it must have been invented by a very sound psychologist; if it did not take place at Riga on the seventh of February 1744, it must have happened soon afterwards—not once but a dozen times.

The Princess Johanna and her daughter had travelled to Riga in a draughty, badly upholstered carriage, their faces shrouded in woollen hoods, their feet swollen with frostbite, attended by the meanest of retinues. They left Riga wrapped in costly sables—Elizabeth's first gift to her guests—seated in the

Imperial sledge on mattresses and cushions of silk and drawn by ten fiery horses. Their suite consisted of:

A squadron of cuirassiers of the Grand Duke's regiment.

A detachment of the Liefland Regiment.

The Vice-Governor and the Commandant of Riga.

The sledge of Simon Narychkin, who, however, rode mostly in the Princess's sledge.

A number of sledges occupied by representatives of the nobility, the magistrature, and deputations of various corporations.

A large number of officers who galloped beside the Imperial sledge.

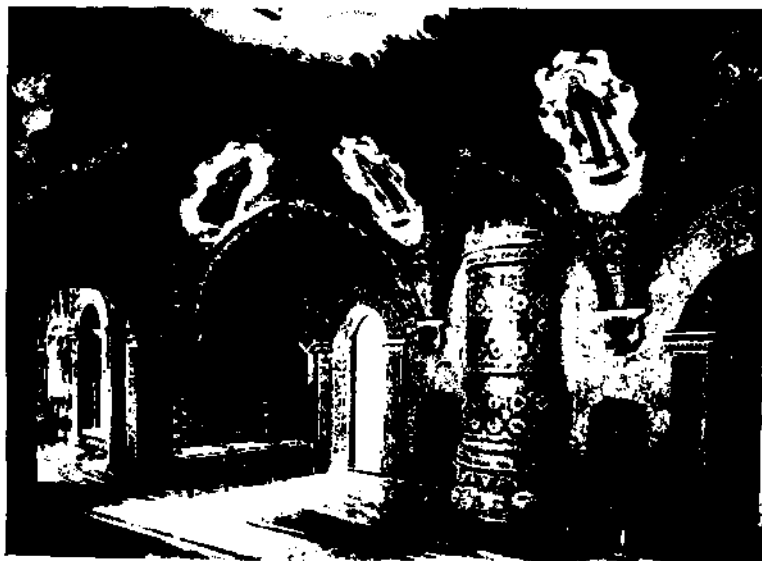
The Imperial sledge was so roomy and so luxuriously fitted that it was possible to lie down in comfort and even to sleep in it at night. In this way the journey was continued at three times the previous speed; they only stopped to take meals or change horses, and at the end of three days reached Petersburg.

Here a stay of several days had been arranged, so that the ladies "could adapt their wardrobes to the Russian fashion." This was a tactful figure of speech. Elizabeth, who attached great importance to the splendour of her Court, realized that the German visitors would probably appear shabby even beside the meanest of her ladies-in-waiting, and she had arranged that whatever had been omitted from their wardrobes at Zerbst should be supplied at her expense in Petersburg.

The Empress herself had already left Petersburg for Moscow, and naturally most of the Court, including diplomats and the leaders of society, had followed her. This migration from Petersburg to Moscow and back happened twice a year; and, if contemporary accounts can be credited, about one hundred thousand people took part on each occasion. Nevertheless enough of the aristocracy had remained behind to fill the Winter Palace with brilliance and life in honour of the foreign guests. "There were nearly a thousand people," the Princess Johanna reported. Four ladies-in-waiting had been left behind



CATHERINE'S GREAT SLED



A LIVING-ROOM IN THE KREMLIN



## THE BRIDAL JOURNEY

for her service by the Empress, and Johanna thanked her, in an extravagantly worded letter, for all "the indescribable kindnesses shown to me on my arrival," and promised to begin the next stage of the journey on the following day but one, so that she might be in Moscow on the ninth of February, the Grand Duke's birthday. She forgot to refer to her daughter by so much as a single word.

The German Ambassador, Mardefeld, and the French Ambassador, De la Chétardie, the two men whom Frederick II had advised Johanna to trust, had remained behind in Petersburg. They had doubtless postponed their departure so that they might be the first to converse with their confederate, the Princess of Zerbst. The English Ambassador had also remained behind—presumably to watch events. "Mardefeld and De la Chétardie have been very assiduous in paying their court," he wrote to London.

Johanna Elizabeth was thus able to embark on her diplomatic mission without delay. She had secret meetings with Mardefeld and De la Chétardie and heard from them what she had already heard from Frederick, namely that Bestushev had been furious at the choice of the Princess Sophie, and had said: "They are about to marry the Grand Duke without the knowledge of us great Russians, but the matter is by no means so easy." By this Bestushev meant that he would urge the Synod to protest against the marriage of two relatives. But this difficulty, the Ambassadors went on to explain, had already been disposed of by the Empress herself.

"In a word," the Princess Johanna wrote to her husband, "I have actually found everything here just as the King described it to me in Berlin." Astonishing! Since Mardefeld was on the one hand Frederick's informant, and on the other his mouthpiece, it would indeed have been odd if their statements had not tallied. "There is no need" she continued, referring to Bestushev, "to fear such people, but they can do a great deal of mischief if one does not take precautions." It is a sentence full of contradictions, but it shows clearly that the Princess Johanna left Petersburg fired with a new deter-

mination to "take precautions," in other words to bring about the downfall of Bestushev.

Her retinue consisted of thirty sledges—a very different journey from the one through Prussia and Pomerania. The road over which the whole Court and its immense following travelled twice a year was naturally wide and well kept, and offered every comfort to the travellers. The Empress owned a number of castles along the road, but even the ordinary halts at which they rested were like palaces compared with the squalid German inns. Elaborate provisions had been made in advance for everything they might need: meals were waiting for them, and horses ready harnessed. In the villages the people assembled to greet them, crying as they saw the Imperial sledge: "There goes the Grand Duke's bride!"

On the ninth of February (Russian calendar), the Grand Duke Peter's birthday, they had actually reached the last stage of the journey, and were within ten miles of Moscow. A meal was hastily swallowed, and then the ladies began to prepare themselves for the reception. Sophie chose a close-fitting gown of pink moiré trimmed with silver, and without a hoop. We learn this from her *Memoirs*: it is her first reference to a dress. So far she had always despised and neglected her appearance, but from now on there was to be a change.

With furs thrown over their Court gowns, fur caps on their hair, with sixteen horses harnessed to the state sledge, they continued their journey towards the heart of Russia at a speed which for an age of post coaches was astounding—ten German miles in three hours! The Empress's envoy, Sievers, sat on the box and urged the driver to his utmost speed with continual shouts. It was already dark by the time the walls of Moscow came in sight, but in spite of this the roof of the sleigh was lowered so that the populace might catch a glimpse of the illustrious guests. At eight o'clock they drove up to the Golowin Palace. Officers of the guard and the Empress's bodyguard saluted them. In the entrance hall they were greeted by Brümmer and by the famous physician,

## THE BRIDAL JOURNEY

Lestoque, who had played such an important part in Elizabeth's accession.

They arrived in their rooms and had hardly time to remove their furs when the Grand Duke appeared, accompanied by the Prince of Homburg and his attendants. "I could wait no longer," he said. "For preference I should like to have harnessed myself to the dilatory sledge." Judging by later accounts we must conclude that the Grand Duke had been carefully rehearsed in this charmingly impetuous behaviour and these delightful words. At the time, however, his heartfelt welcome affected both the Princesses very agreeably.

Sophie had no time to take stock of her future husband. A messenger from the Empress was already waiting to conduct the guests to the royal presence. Peter offered his hand to the Princess Johanna, the Prince of Homburg his to Sophie. They traversed an endless succession of splendid rooms, row upon row of courtiers and court ladies bowed to them as they passed, and at last they stood on the threshold of the state bedroom, and saw the Empress, a picture of gracious majesty, in an immense hooped skirt, with a huge black feather in her hair.

Johanna, remembering Brümmer's advice, was mindful to kiss her hand, then she proceeded in well-chosen words to express her gratitude to the Empress for the favours she had showered upon them. "All that I have done for you so far," Elizabeth replied, "is nothing compared with what I shall do for your family in the future. My own blood is not dearer to me than yours." Whereupon she embraced the Princess Johanna, as the latter informed her husband, "most tenderly," and did not forget to shed a few tears in memory of her sainted bridegroom, as she noticed Johanna's strong resemblance to her dead brother.

Sophie meanwhile had been able to inspect the Empress with eager eyes. "I must say," she wrote thirty years later, "one could not behold her for the first time without astonishment at her beauty and her majesty." Nothing more? She preferred not to remember more. Many years elapsed between

her first impression of the Empress and this account of it; much, and much that was evil, had happened during those years. The future Catherine would not admit that at her first sight of Elizabeth she was not only dazzled by her beauty, but saw in this radiant, bejewelled woman before whom every courtier bowed in humility, in this victorious usurper, in this ruler of millions, in this woman who belonged to no man yet who ruled all men, no more and no less than the embodiment of all her own dreams—her ideal.

## CHAPTER III

### ELIZABETH

It was Sophie's fate to live for seventeen years in the shadow of Elizabeth, and not until she stepped out of it did it become apparent she had grown head and shoulders above her model. Nevertheless the future Catherine's character bore unmistakable traces of Elizabeth's influence. She resembled Elizabeth far more than she resembled her own mother; she learned more from Elizabeth than she had ever learned from Mamsell Cardel, or all her other teachers put together. She did not realize that she was learning anything, she simply adapted herself unconsciously to everything that pleased and impressed her in Elizabeth's character, and most of all to that which was Elizabeth's dominant trait—her nationality.

Elizabeth Petrovna was a Russian to her finger-tips. She was the daughter of the greatest of the Czars and a woman who had been a camp-follower. In her veins the blood of the Romanoffs mingled with that of the primitive peasantry, and with it flowed all the mingled attributes of the Russian character. On the one hand she was ambitious, despotic and cruel—on the other, kind, gay and simple. She was both vicious and narrow-minded, credulous and suspicious; she was capable of the most spontaneous generosity and the pettiest vanity, was quickly moved to sympathy and as easily roused to cruelty; she had moods of amazing energy which would change in a moment to lazy apathy. She was a woman of violent contradictions, completely at the mercy of her savage and volatile moods, easy to get on with but impossible to reckon on. She was a Russian through and through, but also a woman; she had all the weaknesses (this is no place for controversy) which are commonly held to be feminine, and

therein lay the chief difference between her and the future Catherine.

Elizabeth was eight years old when her parents were legally married. She had been carefully brought up, for her father had decided that he would marry her to the French Dauphin, afterwards Louis XV. She learned to speak French fluently, but she found time as well—in the barracks, which all her life remained her favourite resort—to become familiar with the speech of the common Russian soldier. She was an excellent dancer, and an even better horsewoman; she knew how to behave with faultless good manners, but there were occasions when she forgot those good manners.

When the French marriage project fell through, she was betrothed to the Bishop of Lübeck, Johanna's brother, who died of smallpox a few weeks before the wedding. It is quite possible that she really loved him and mourned his death sincerely—such things can happen even at Court—but that she continued to love him to the day of her death and never ceased to mourn him is a romantic legend, though one in which she herself firmly believed. This life-long fidelity did not prevent her from taking numerous lovers, but it provided a very useful reason for rejecting the equally numerous suitors for her hand in marriage. It was also a salve to her conscience, for Elizabeth was no cynic; on the contrary, she was deeply religious, sometimes almost to a morbid degree. When these fits of piety took her she would spend days on her knees in churches and convents, fasting and doing penance, then life and its excitements would call to her again, she would conceive a passion for some handsome officer of the Guards, for a lackey, or a stable-boy. She was ashamed of these passions, but she had her excuse for them; a cruel fate had robbed her of the only man whom she could really have loved. Whenever she was reminded of her dead bridegroom she wept, and these tears purged her conscience; she liked to be reminded of him.

Just as her moods of debauchery gave place to prayer, periods of ambition would be followed by periods of complete

indifference. When Peter II died—she was twenty-four years old at the time—she did not raise a finger to press her legitimate claims to the throne. And she need literally have done no more than raise a finger: she had the support of the Guards, of the old Russian nobility, and, so far as it is possible to judge in an age when there was no means of assessing public opinion, of the nation. But she seemed to prefer the life of a beautiful independent woman to the joys of rulership. She galloped over the countryside accompanied by her lover of the moment, attended the peasants' dances, frequented the barracks, and almost every week allowed herself to be named as godmother to some soldier's child. The Court was scandalized. It came to her ears that the Regent intended to shut her up in a convent, and this was probably the chief reason why she decided, on that December night in 1741, to put her power to the test. She succeeded. Three years later Brümmer thought it necessary to send a courier to meet the Princess of Zerbst to remind her that she must not forget to kiss Elizabeth's hand—so exacting had she become about outward marks of respect.

Compared with her predecessors, Anna Ivanova and Anna Leopoldovna, Elizabeth had a remarkably strong personality. The nation loved her. Those years when, for her own amusement, she had mixed with the people, now stood her in good stead. Unlike former unapproachable Emperesses, she had met her people face to face; they had seen her radiant beauty with their own eyes, had heard her speak their language with ease and fluency. All this gave her a popularity that lasted throughout a reign which, far from being truly democratic, was the most autocratic and despotic imaginable. In all the twenty years that she occupied the throne of Russia it never occurred to her to do anything more for her people than give them an occasional magnificent spectacle. And it never once occurred to the people that they themselves were paying for these spectacles which often cost millions of roubles. Elizabeth had sworn that she would never sign a death-warrant, and she kept her word. But during her

reign more than a hundred thousand of her subjects were banished to Siberia, conspirators had their tongues torn out, and in the space of those twenty years more people died in terrible agony of corporal punishment — as many as a thousand strokes of the knout were administered at a time—than fell under the executioner's knife in other countries. Elizabeth loved the soldiers, but the smallest offence was punished with a hundred cudgel blows; she loved the peasants, but it never occurred to her to interfere with serfdom; the peasant belonged to his overlord, who might sell him, work him to the point of collapse, and abuse him as brutally as he pleased. Any peasant guilty of a petty theft was liable to be sent to Siberia together with his wife, without any possibility of appeal to a higher authority, and his children had to be left behind with his master. The idea of attempting to reform these abuses occurred as little to Elizabeth as to the peasants themselves; they both considered the prevailing conditions to be ordained by God: thus it had been, was now, and ever would be.

Elizabeth's general tendency was to leave everything as she found it, or preferably to re-introduce the old order which had existed in the time of her father, Peter the Great. She had made his policy of government her own, and in order to carry it out she had placed at the head of affairs the only one of Peter's protégés who was still alive—Bestushev. But she lacked her father's thoroughness, and applied herself more particularly to the externals of his policy: to europeanizing the Court and increasing its outward splendour. In this she considerably surpassed him. She bought whatever money could buy. Architects, painters, sculptors, doctors, scientists, dancing-masters, actors and distinguished foreigners of all kinds found their way to Russia, and the sons of Russian nobles were given every possible encouragement to travel abroad and acquire European culture. But she quite lost sight of the ultimate purpose of these costly undertakings—namely, the expansion of Russia's imperial power. Peter the Great would never have stood by and watched the struggle

between Prussia and Austria without applying the principles of his policy and seeking to gain some advantage for Russia. Elizabeth's indifference secured Russia sixteen years of peace, during which, though she was the ally of Austria, she did not send one soldier or a single ducat to the aid of Maria Theresa.

It was not always easy to dissociate Elizabeth's politics from her personal relationships. While Bestushev was conspiring with Austria against Prussia and France, she was carrying on an intimate correspondence with Frederick II, and the French Ambassador, De la Chétardie, had free access to her presence. In the case of Frederick she was guided by a sincere desire for peace on her frontiers; but De la Chétardie was one of those who had helped her seize the throne, and he was in all probability—although there is no proof of it—her lover over a considerable period. The same may be said of Lestoque, the royal physician, who had also been a hero of the Palace Revolution of 1741. She found it impossible to discard these friends indiscriminately, nor had she any wish to do so. She was grateful by nature, but her gratitude, like all her other qualities, lacked both reason and moderation. She overwhelmed her friends with gifts, honours, and even genuine affection, but the moment the slightest breath of suspicion aroused her mistrust her affection turned to hatred, and she would persecute the suspected "traitor" with all the savagery of a nervous tyrant. Not a single one of her friends escaped this fate in the course of the years.

She allowed Bestushev to have his own way in most things, but there were occasions when she asserted herself. She did not, for example, consult him when she sent for her nephew to come to Moscow so that she might appoint him her heir, and she acted against Bestushev's express wish when she chose Sophie to be Peter's bride. In these two matters she acted on her own initiative and with an impulsiveness which is unique in diplomatic history. On the other hand there were long periods when of her own free will she chose to be no more than a beautiful woman surrounded by a

group of admiring and devoted courtiers—a woman who demanded to be perpetually entertained. In the mornings she must be hunting, in the afternoons driving; in the evening there would be a visit to the opera, or a ball. For all these different occasions she had, of course, to change her costume and her coiffure—those enormously elaborate costumes and coiffures of the eighteenth century. How then could she be expected to find time to listen to the dreary dissertations of her Minister? The day, as it was, seemed far too short, and at Carnival-time supper was not served until two o'clock in the morning. After Carnival there followed a period of fasting and prayer in the Troitsky Convent.

Sometimes Bestushev had to wait weeks, or even months, for a decision or a mere signature. There is a well-known story of how on one occasion Elizabeth had been brought to the point of signing a document. She had already written the letters "Eliz" when a wasp settled on her hand. It was six months before she could bring herself to complete the half-finished signature! "If the Empress would only give to government affairs one hundredth part of the time Maria Theresa devotes to them, I should be the happiest man on earth," Bestushev complained to Uhl, the Conference Minister in Vienna.

At times she returned from the Convent filled with the zeal of a reformer, and then a "strict commission" would be appointed at Court to investigate illicit relationships and punish them. Hundreds of so-called "good-for-nothing women" were locked up in prison-cells and convents, but in the meantime the Empress continued to live on intimate terms with the handsome Rasumovsky, who had once been a church singer and was the son of simple Ukranian peasants. *L'empereur nocturne*, as he was nicknamed at Court, remained Elizabeth's favourite for a longer period than any other; it is even highly probable that he was morganatically married to her. (The documentary evidence concerning this marriage is said to have been destroyed in romantic circumstances—but this point will be dealt with more fully later.) In any case, Rasumovsky

was an ideal favourite, not only because of his extraordinary good looks, but because he was extremely indolent: he never interfered in politics, he was utterly lacking ambition; when his sovereign mistress loaded him with titles, he merely said: "Do what you like, you will never succeed in making people take me seriously." He was never jealous, though he had sufficient cause, for the presence of her living lover could no more induce the Empress to subdue her "sybaritic temperament" than the memory of her dead bridegroom. Popular ignorance of Russian history has caused many incidents to be linked with Catherine's name which should really be attributed to Elizabeth. It was not to Catherine's bedroom, but to Elizabeth's, that more than one handsome young soldier came by night to leave it the next morning an officer of rank. Indeed, the "strict commission" must in the course of its investigations have been hard put to it to avoid tracking down the most "good-for-nothing" of all women in Russia. Yet this was only one example among a hundred others of the preposterous contrast that existed between the glittering surface and the true conditions of life in the Russia of that day.

Elizabeth was typical of the country and the time in which she lived. Russia in the eighteenth century consisted chiefly of starving illiterates and a small, artificially civilized upper class. This upper class owned palaces of extravagant splendour, while round the corner the streets were littered with unspeakable filth and the air was poisoned by the putrefying corpses of horses which no one ever bothered to move. The reception-rooms in the palaces were extravagantly furnished, with gold and silver plate and costly pictures, but in the living-rooms the stoves smoked, and the icy Russian winds blew through the cracks of badly constructed wooden walls. The Empress's palaces, according to the reports of foreign ambassadors, outshone those of Versailles and Fontainebleau in beauty and magnificence, but the thought of furnishing them permanently never entered Elizabeth's head. She dragged her bed and chests and chairs from Moscow to Petersburg and back. Half of them were lost, damaged, or stolen on

the journey, and her immense suites of apartments remained for the most part bare. She owned fifteen thousand silk dresses and five thousand pairs of shoes, and if she was unable to get into one of her dresses quickly enough she would box her maid's ears. Once, at a Court ball, a certain lady appeared wearing a rose in her hair, which the Empress had also chosen to do that night; Elizabeth rushed across the room, and in the midst of the glittering assembly, under the astonished eyes of foreign diplomats, tore the rose from the unfortunate lady's head. Her every action proved her to be an over-civilized barbarian.

When the Princess of Zerbst arrived in Moscow with her daughter, her vanity was flattered by all the marks of respect that were paid to her. But Sophie, familiar only with the provincial German women of her home, was overwhelmed by the warmth of Elizabeth's reception of them, a warmth which she felt must surely be prompted by something more personal than the mere political project of a marriage between two children distantly related to her. What then was the source of this cordiality? It simply meant that Elizabeth had a Russian soul, that she was a spendthrift not only of money. She felt the need, at any rate spasmodically, to give herself. Neither her dead bridegroom nor her favourites could satisfy that need: the need to give. She had refused to marry—she would not be dependent on any man—but perhaps she longed for children. Two years previously she had sent for her nephew Peter to come to Russia, had made him Grand Duke and heir to the Russian throne, but Peter, unfortunately, was not the kind of boy to inspire love. Then she had chosen a bride for him, a girl who appealed to the sentimental streak in her own character, for she was the niece of the man for whom Elizabeth loved to shed romantic tears. On her lonely throne, with a worthless lover at her side, surrounded by self-seeking courtiers, Elizabeth abandoned herself with all the overflowing warmth of her heart to a double passion: friendship for Johanna Elizabeth, and a maternal affection for the young Princess. For the moment she was



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more human than her guests: she had forgotten that she was their benefactress.

It is not surprising that she made a tremendous impression on Sophie, and that her influence was far greater than the later Catherine would ever admit. With all her uncouthness, her semi-barbarism, her moods, her hysterical outbursts, Elizabeth was a woman of immense and natural gifts, by far the most attractive personality—Frederick II, though far superior in intellect, did not count—whom the two ladies from Zerbst had ever met.

"Our daughter is having a great success," the Princess wrote a week later to Christian August at Zerbst. "The Empress has taken a fancy to her and the Grand Duke loves her. Bestushev is beside himself. Everything is satisfactory—*c'est une affaire faite.*"

Without a doubt things were satisfactory, they must have seemed miraculous to these two ladies who at home had suffered so acutely from the modesty of their circumstances, and in Brunswick and Berlin from the inferiority of their status. Now they suddenly found themselves the centre of interest at a Court which was no less brilliant than the fabulous Versailles: Elizabeth's kindness and generosity, in the exuberance of her first friendliness, knew no bounds. The newcomers must not be allowed to feel that they were poor country cousins—they must be honoured and fêted as if they were the most important of foreign potentates. On the day after their arrival both mother and daughter were presented with the order of St. Catherine amid celebrations at which the whole Court of Moscow assisted. They were given their own household: two chamberlains, two gentlemen-in-waiting, two pages and innumerable servants. "We are living like queens," the Princess wrote. "Everything is bedecked, inlaid with gold—wonderful! We drive out in marvellous style."

Without a doubt things were satisfactory for the moment, but how long would this state of affairs last? Johanna's dearest ambition had been a brilliant match for her daughter,

and this she now felt to be assured. That a marriage must follow the betrothal, and what the outcome of that marriage must needs be under the circumstances, concerned her not at all. She knew nothing of the circumstances, nothing, above all, about the future bridegroom, Peter. "The Grand Duke loves Sophie," she declared. Was that true? Of course it was not true. How could anything approaching love have ripened so quickly? The important question she might have asked was whether these two children—for they were no more than children—who had been destined for each other by the will of Elizabeth, showed any spontaneous inclination to adapt themselves to one another, to be mutually tender and affectionate.

As far as Sophie was concerned this question could be answered without reservation. Whether or not her wish to please Peter, to find favour in his eyes, was governed exclusively by the knowledge that he was heir to the Russian throne and the vast Russian Empire, there could be no doubt at this time concerning her anxiety to become the best possible wife to the Grand Duke. Peter and her ambition were one and the same, and since her heart was free she was naturally inclined to give it where her ambition lay.

But what of Peter's attitude toward his approaching wedding? It is true that on Sophie's arrival he had, under the watchful eye of his tutor, made a charming speech to her. But the first time he had an opportunity of speaking to her alone he told her that he was really in love with a former lady-in-waiting of Elizabeth's, and would have liked to marry the lady if only his aunt had permitted it. What was the meaning of this confession, which was certainly not calculated to establish a happy relationship between two young people about to be betrothed? It is impossible to judge Peter without a closer knowledge of his history.

He was by no means the half-cretin or villain he has so often been depicted: he was simply an average youth faced with a task too great for him. His troubles had begun in Holstein, where he had been robbed of his childhood by all

manner of official duties. He had been happy only on the parade-ground. A soldier's uniform—symbol of manhood and strength—delighted the delicate boy, and he felt his intelligence equal to the demands of barrack-room life. He would have made an excellent sergeant-major; in any subordinate position he would always have performed his duty unflinchingly. But fate had other ends in store for him. First it was the Swedish, then the Russian throne that beckoned him, so that he was forced to learn first Swedish and then Russian—and failed miserably at both. Did he want to be a ruler? A small regiment would have delighted him; but a whole empire——? When he came to Russia, Elizabeth, who was herself quite uneducated, was astounded by his ignorance. She handed him over to a Saxon tutor, Stehlin, who made strenuous efforts to teach the future heir-apparent some rudiments of knowledge without overtaking his brain, but he had little success. Peter made no progress either in Russian, history, or in anything else worth mentioning.

It was not merely a matter of acquiring the Russian language. Given sufficient time, Peter with his average intelligence could, like any other young man, have mastered a foreign language. But at the back of every harmless task his teacher set him he saw lurking the greater task: that of succeeding to the throne, eventually of ruling—and it was this against which he rebelled. He longed for the barracks, for the simple, easy commands of his superior officers, which in turn he could repeat to his own subordinates. Chosen against his will to be the future ruler of the greatest empire on earth, he still remained at heart a little Holstein soldier. His hero—for Russian politics meant less than nothing to him—was the hero of every other Holstein soldier: Frederick of Prussia. He entered the Greek Church because that was required of him and he did not know how to resist, but at heart he still remained a German Lutheran. He took lessons in Russian because he was forced to do so, but he made the least possible use of them. He surrounded himself, as far as he was allowed,

with Holstein officers and conversed with them in his mother tongue.

Now they had found him a wife. He knew exactly why: as soon as possible they must found the future Russian dynasty together. As always, he was outwardly dutiful; he repeated the charming words which Brümmer had taught him to welcome his cousin, but as soon as they were alone together, he wounded her as deeply as he could. He was protesting against his betrothal as he protested against everything else that was happening to him.

Sophie could not afford to show how deeply she was wounded. In any case she was not a spoilt child. She had learned to fight for love and friendship, and she was determined to do her utmost in the face of this new situation. As yet she was quite unversed in feminine coquetry but she applied her intelligence to the task as was her usual habit. Her intelligence told her that she must pretend to be more stupid than she was, and this she did. She adapted herself to Peter's childish ways, and without his being aware of it brought herself down to his level. This manoeuvre met with a certain degree of success; he gained confidence in her, began to behave naturally, and accepted her as a playmate. But love? There was not a trace of it. If anything the contrary: they entered into a kind of secret alliance against all those who expected and demanded that they should fall passionately in love. With an instinct developed far beyond her years, this inexperienced girl led the immature boy along the only path that could bring him to love: the byway of harmless, innocent, unerotic trifling, which made him lose his fear of love.

At the same time she proved herself to be made of very different stuff from the boy. The thought of the Russian crown, which crushed him even before he wore it, stimulated all her latent powers. The task which terrified him and made him shrink to even less than his own stature, inspired Sophie with new strength. Whereas he recoiled timorously from everything that was strange or new, intrenching himself frantically inside his own little world, Sophie set her face with fervour

and enthusiasm towards the new—the future. She wanted to become Empress of Russia, therefore she must first learn to understand the language and adopt the faith of this religious nation; she must become a Russian. Like Peter, she was given a teacher for the Russian language and a bishop to instruct her in the doctrines of the Greek Church. But unlike Peter, who because of his inattention and his limited intelligence had been the despair of his teachers, she showed a real passion for learning. At home she had been a moderately good pupil, but now her teachers could not sufficiently praise her industry and her quickness. The day with its many social duties was far too short for her eagerness; she rose from her bed at night, seized a book, and with bare feet to keep herself awake, paced the stone floor of her room memorizing words. This was not in order to finish a set task, or to win the approval of her teachers to which she was completely indifferent; it was for Russia!

She was always lucky. If some misfortune befell her it proved, in the end, to turn out to her advantage, and this time she had the good luck to contract pneumonia as a result of her nightly barefoot studies. The Empress Elizabeth happened to be staying at the Troitsky Convent when Sophie was taken ill. She hurried back to the Palace as soon as she heard the news and without removing her furs, just as she had stepped from the sledge, rushed to the sick bed. She arrived in time to end a furious quarrel between Johanna Elizabeth and the physicians who were attending her daughter. Strange as it may seem, Johanna was in this instance probably right from the medical point of view: she was refusing to allow the doctors to bleed Sophie. Elizabeth, however, commanded that whatever her physicians considered advisable must be done, and the girl, with her persistent fever, was bled sixteen times in the course of three weeks.

During those three weeks, when she was seldom conscious, Sophie won innumerable hearts. Her ladies-in-waiting knew how she had contracted this terrible illness, the chambermaids told the story to the lackeys, the lackeys repeated it to the

court-purveyors; the butcher, the baker, the shoemaker, the joiner carried it round the town: the little German princess was lying at death's door because she had risen from her bed every night so that she might learn the Russian language more quickly! When her life was despaired of by the doctors, her mother suggested that a Protestant minister should be called, but Sophie said: "No, ask Simon Todorsky to come. I should like to talk to him." The physicians and ladies-in-waiting were earwitnesses of these astounding words. Remember, Sophie knew that her life was despaired of, for only in such a case would the question of summoning a priest have arisen. It was obviously unlikely that in a few short weeks she should have become a genuine convert to the Orthodox Greek Church—the fact remains then that she had the extraordinary strength of will, when she was lying on the point of death, to use the most effective means of winning the sympathy of her future countrymen. Her effort met with complete success. The very people who had regarded the arrival of the German heretics with the gravest mistrust were now overcome with sympathy and compassion for this child.

The Empress spent many hours at the sick bed, and when the physicians shook their heads, she wept. The childless woman was filled with a maternal love for this young creature whom she scarcely knew, and whom she thought she was so soon to lose again. At the same time her affection for the girl's mother steadily waned. Johanna was finding it intolerable that her daughter should now hold the centre of the stage. She was perpetually trying to draw attention to herself by bickering with the doctors and the ladies-in-waiting, until at last the Empress forbade her to enter the sick-room. The fever reached its crisis on the 19th of March. On the following day "the abscess in the side" burst, and the patient was saved. Four days later Johanna Elizabeth sent a request to her daughter, so lately snatched from death, for—who would have guessed it?—the length of blue and silver brocade which her uncle, the Bishop of Lübeck, had given her on her departure! It was the only pretty thing Sophie had

## ELIZABETH

brought with her from home, and the ladies who were in attendance in the sick-room saw how reluctantly she parted with it—this child who had endured so much pain and was still weak with exhaustion. They spoke with unconcealed anger of this inhuman mother, whose love of finery was only exceeded by her lack of natural feeling. They repeated the incident to Elizabeth, and quantities of lovely materials were sent to Sophie, including a new length of blue brocade shot with silver. She was also given, in celebration of her recovery, a necklace of brilliants and ear-rings worth twenty thousand roubles, and the Grand Duke sent her a watch set with rubies.

On the twenty-first of April—her fifteenth birthday—she appeared at Court for the first time after her illness. When she saw herself in the mirror after she was dressed, she was terrified by her own reflection. She had grown much taller, and was as thin as a skeleton; her face was long and lean, and she had lost a lot of hair. Elizabeth sent her a pot of rouge so that, as an exception, she might put a little colour on her cheeks, but in spite of this she can hardly have presented a picture of radiant youthful beauty. But what of that? As soon as she entered the reception rooms she could feel in the pressure of every hand, in the look on every face, the sympathy and love she had newly won. She was no longer a stranger, regarded with curiosity and suspicion. She was one of them, and her return was greeted with sincere and heartfelt pleasure. In those weeks of helpless illness she had accomplished more than in all the previous weeks of laborious effort.

The next day she was back at work again with Simon Todorsky. No one doubted that these lessons, coupled with her decision to enter the Greek Church, could lead to any but the obvious result, yet a lively correspondence was begun on the subject between Moscow and Zerbst, for it was necessary to obtain her father's formal consent to Sophie's change of religion. Of course Christian August should have known from the first that her conversion was inevitable, but—whether his wife had managed to persuade him it might be avoided,

or whether his own religious conscience began to prick him as the hour of decision approached—he began to raise difficulties. Frederick II, who beside the parties directly concerned had the greatest interest in the marriage, wrote to the Landgraf of Hessen: "Our good Prince is entirely obstinate on this point. I have gone to endless trouble to overcome his religious scruples. His answer to all my arguments is: my daughter shall not enter the Greek Church." The Prince, in his simplicity, could not guess how greatly he was displeasing his king by this attitude, that same king who had just invaded Austria on the pretext of protecting the oppressed Protestants. He was no philosopher, like Frederick, who eventually found an obliging minister to explain to Christian August in learned and holy language that there was "no essential difference" between the Lutheran and the Greek faiths. Johanna Elizabeth wrote in the same strain to her husband from Moscow: "I have been speaking with the Archimandrite, and I swear to you that I can discover no errors in the Doctrine." And the fifteen-year-old Sophie wrote to her father: "I can see no difference between the Greek and the Lutheran doctrine." As might have been expected, these arguments finally persuaded Christian August. He gave his consent "since he must regard the choice of Sophie as a dispensation of God," and merely asked that provision for a widow's jointure might be made in the marriage agreement, preferably of Holstein or Livland. To Frederick II and all the others who had witnessed his defeat he repeated continually thereafter: "Lutheran-Greek, Greek-Lutheran, it is all the same!"

"I have had more trouble in accomplishing this business," Frederick wrote, "than if it had been the most important matter in the world."

But no sooner had Frederick brought his "little maquereillage" against Christian August's religious scruples to a successful issue, than his staunchest ally, Johanna Elizabeth, was to endanger the whole "business" in Moscow by her excessive zeal.

He had enjoined her to bring about the fall of the Vice-Chancellor Bestushev, he had even promised her a reward for this, he had—which was far more significant—inflamed her political ambition, and it was this political ambition which was jeopardizing the whole marriage plan. For though Johanna was at this time still conspiring against Bestushev, it was clear that she was only acting “pour le roi de Prusse.” The betrothal was about to be formally announced; Sophie was beloved by the Empress, the Court, and, as far as could be judged, by the whole nation; what danger could there be at this stage from Bestushev? A moment's consideration might have told Johanna that there was no danger, that Bestushev could not possibly, however much this marriage annoyed him, expect the Empress to revoke her decision at the eleventh hour. A little common sense might have prompted her to make things easy for the “enemy” who had suffered defeat at her hands. If she really believed he was dangerous it was all the more reason why she should have made every effort, now that he was comparatively harmless, to win him over to herself and her daughter.

But she was incapable of weighing such considerations. To do so would have meant forfeiting her political ambitions, which had so long been thwarted and were at last given an outlet, would have meant forfeiting her secret mission, Frederick's approbation, and the Abbey of Quedlinburgh. Nothing was further from her intention. Circumstances, too, made it difficult for her to exercise impartial judgment. From the moment she first set foot in Russia she had found herself associating with Bestushev's enemies. Mardefeld and De la Chétardie were her confidants, the three of them held secret meetings, plans were hatched, feelers put out, cipher letters despatched to Berlin and Paris. Johanna would have been a vastly different woman had she possessed the strength of mind to abandon this intrigue the moment her personal interest in it evaporated. Far from doing so, the frenzy of her efforts increased from day to day, and she was blissfully unaware that the conspirators were using this frenzy to further their own

ends, namely, the plan of an alliance between France, Prussia and Russia against Maria Theresa, a plan to which, in their opinion, the one and only obstacle was Bestushev.

Not one of them had any real knowledge of Russian conditions, nor of Elizabeth's character, not even De la Chétardie, who might have had some reason for knowing, and certainly none of them had any intimate knowledge of the man whose name was constantly on their lips: Bestushev. It is still almost impossible to form an accurate opinion of this man. The reports of foreign ambassadors, even of those who were Bestushev's confederates—the English and the Austrian envoys—describe him as a man of moderate gifts, with many failings, a gambler, a drinker, and an unscrupulous intriguer. On the other hand, the description given by the future Catherine, who suffered considerably at his hands, showed him to have been a blunt and headstrong despot, but a man capable of selfless devotion to an idea, an excellent psychologist, a fanatical worker, an incorruptible and faithful servant of his mistress, and, for this very reason, a thorn in the flesh of all self-seeking courtiers. It is unnecessary to investigate the truth of these individual opinions since their very diversity supplies the answer to the riddle: Bestushev may have been a genius or a fool, a Cato or a rogue, but he was first and foremost a Russian nationalist. He was an exponent of the Russian nationalism which at that time was in the ascendant, the mouthpiece of Elizabeth's national sentiments, and Elizabeth, though she was many other things as well, a fact which has confused our judgment of her—a pleasure-seeking woman, a bigot, an admirer of French manners and French clothes, sentimentally attached to her Holstein relations—Elizabeth, in her heart of hearts, was, and never ceased to be, a fanatical Russian.

This was something which the conspirators could not grasp. They knew that Bestushev bored and irritated the Empress, that he was anything but attractive to her; they imagined that only a slight and well-timed effort was needed to bring about his fall. They conspired against him without taking his char-

acter into account, without realizing that he was observant enough to have got wind of their secret meetings, astute enough to have guessed their purpose, and powerful enough to have guarded himself against their attacks.

Bestushev's precautions were very simple; he merely intercepted their letters and read them. There was in the Foreign Office a man named Goldbach, who was a specialist in the opening, deciphering and re-sealing of letters so that no trace of interference could be seen on either seal or envelope. Innumerable letters passed between Moscow and Europe without either writer or recipient having the slightest suspicion that Bestushev had read and preserved a record of every word. He gave his enemies plenty of time, he gave them ample opportunity of spreading poison. Not until he had collected an overwhelming mass of incriminating evidence, did he carry it to the Empress: there were about fifty letters, mostly from the pen of De la Chétardie.

There was no need for Bestushev to feel uneasy at what was disclosed about himself in the letters; that was fully discounted by the attacks De la Chétardie had permitted himself to make on the Empress. He informed his government at home that Elizabeth was lazy and extravagant, that she put her signature to documents which she had not even taken the trouble to read, that, on the other hand, she changed her clothes four and five times a day, and other details of a similar nature—all set down in the clever and supercilious language of a man who is the representative of a highly civilized nation reporting conditions in a country of barbarians. A far less autocratic and irascible monarch than Elizabeth would have been infuriated by such letters.

De la Chétardie's despatches also brought to light the secret negotiations of the Princess of Zerbst. She was suddenly revealed to Elizabeth's eyes in what was, although she probably did not realize it herself, her true guise—a Prussian spy, a most ungrateful guest who, while she was being overwhelmed with kindness, had meddled with private affairs of state, in the interests, moreover, of a foreign power.

On the first of June the Empress retired to the Troitsky Convent, a pilgrimage she undertook every year in commemoration of the sanctuary it had given her famous father during the Strelitz rebellion. It was here that Bestushev chose to bring her the defamatory letters, doubtless thinking that in the seclusion of the Convent she would find more leisure to attend to serious matters than in the brief intervals between Court festivities. On the third of June she sent a courier to Moscow to summon Johanna Elizabeth, Sophie, and Peter to the Convent. They had barely finished the midday meal which was served to them on their arrival, when Elizabeth sent for Johanna Elizabeth to come to her cell. The Grand Duke and Sophie, left alone, climbed on to the window-seat and began one of those childish conversations which amused Peter and in which Sophie good-naturedly took her share. Their chatter grew louder and more boisterous, they were laughing at the tops of their voices, when Lestoque came out of the Empress's cell and said harshly: "This gaiety will soon cease." Then, turning to Sophie, he added: "You may as well pack your boxes. You will soon be returning home!"

After delivering this sinister threat Lestoque departed, leaving the children to make what they could of his words. They could not imagine what was wrong. The half-hour which followed, when they must both have been thinking that they were soon to be parted for ever, should have kindled some latent spark of feeling in them both. But apparently there were no latent feelings to be roused. Peter showed no particular sorrow at the threatened loss of his playmate, and thus he wounded Sophie for a second time. She was beside herself, but not, of course, on Peter's account. At last the door opened again, and the Empress, scarlet with rage, came out followed by the Princess whose face was swollen with weeping. The two children jumped down from the window-seat; the Empress's eye fell on them, and she went towards Sophie and kissed her.

It would be a complete misconception of Elizabeth's character to imagine that, in a moment of extreme anger, she

paused to consider the innocence of the little Princess, the political reasons for keeping her in Russia, or anything of that kind. She had long since recognized the difference between Sophie and her mother; she had learned to love the girl for herself. There could be no question of sending her home.

Apparently Bestushev felt that it was no longer worth while to attempt to wreck the marriage project, otherwise he might still have done so. He was satisfied that he had rendered his enemies powerless. Johanna Elizabeth would hardly find further opportunities of inciting Elizabeth against him. Lestoque, who had never ceased to keep on cautious good terms with both parties, would be forced to retire from the frustrated intrigue, Brümmer had fallen from grace some time ago, and Mardefeld was compromised. As for De la Chétardie—on Bestushev's advice, he was summarily banished. This was easy enough because, so far, he had never presented his credentials. These credentials, in which Elizabeth was described as "*Sa Majesté Imperiale*," a title which had hitherto never appeared in any official French document, and on which the Empress placed great value, were in his pocket waiting to be produced after Bestushev's fall. It was, so to speak, a private transaction between the French Government and the Russian Empress, but De la Chétardie had found no opportunity to complete it, because for months he had been unable to obtain an interview with Elizabeth. Therefore, as a private individual, he could quite easily be banished. Elizabeth's anger against her former confederate, lover, and friend, was so great that she ordered him to leave behind the portrait of herself set in a frame of diamonds which she had given him. But she allowed him to keep the diamonds.

This then was the outcome of the Princess of Zerbst's first essay in diplomacy: the banishment of De la Chétardie, a cooling of the relations between Russia and Prussia, the promotion of Bestushev from the position of Vice-Chancellor to that of Chancellor, and the final destruction of the Empress's trust in the German relatives whom she had welcomed with

a new dress or anything for her own pleasure, she hastened to gratify the dearest wish of her heart—that of showing her own people that she had outstripped them to an extent which no boy of her age could have done. Was it an ignoble wish? Possibly. But the fifteen years of neglect she had endured make it comprehensible. Few people could have been capable of taking a nobler revenge.

## CHAPTER IV

### ALL HASTE

ELIZABETH made a practice of going to bed as late as possible. When the festivities and official receptions were over, when courtiers and guests had retired, she would sit on in her private apartments with other wakeful souls, and even when these had left her and her exhausted body cried out for rest, she would only allow herself to be undressed; she refused to sleep. So long as it was still dark—which in winter would be until nearly eight o'clock in the morning—she continued to converse with half a dozen of her women who took it in turns to rub the soles of her feet. Was this some perverse eccentricity of her own, or a mysterious oriental rite? Behind the brocade curtains of the royal alcove, on a thin mattress, lay a fully-clothed man. This was the castellan, Tchoulkov, the Empress's most faithful servant, who for twenty years had not slept in a proper bed. At last, as the pale light of dawn came creeping through the curtains, the women would depart, and Rasumovsky, or whoever happened to be the favourite of the moment, would appear and in his arms Elizabeth would at last fall asleep. But Tchoulkov, the man behind the curtain, still remained at his post so long as the Empress slept, which was usually until late in the afternoon.

There was a very simple explanation for this singular habit. Elizabeth feared the night, and most of all she feared to sleep at night. Anna Leopoldovna had been asleep when she was overthrown, and Elizabeth feared that a similar fate might overtake her while she too slept. Her superstition and her fears, like all her other characteristics, were morbidly exaggerated, although they were not entirely without foundation. Yet whence could danger threaten her? Her subjects loved

her, the idea of a popular revolution in an age when independent thought occurred even less to the people of Russia than to those of Western Europe, was a remote possibility. Nothing but a Palace Revolution could mean the loss of life and throne to a Russian ruler, and indeed the history of the Russian crown throughout the eighteenth century consists of a series of palace revolutions so continuous that a contemporary diplomat said with reason: "The Russian throne is neither hereditary nor elective; it is seized." Only a year after Elizabeth had taken possession of the throne a conspiracy was discovered which cost Madame Lapouchin, a lady-in-waiting, her tongue, the Austrian ambassador, Botte, his post, and quite possibly Maria Theresa the possession of Silesia. Every palace revolution was organized under the banner of some fresh pretender, and the "Botte Revolution," had been plotted in the interests of the dethroned baby, Czar Ivan. Ivan was Elizabeth's only serious rival. True, he was a mere child, not yet old enough to read or write, but nevertheless a child who had been royally anointed, whose likeness had been minted on coins of the realm, for whom throughout a whole year prayers had been offered up in all the churches of Russia. It was the spectre of this child that haunted Elizabeth and robbed her of her sleep. She had intended originally to send him abroad with his parents—the entire Brunswick family had already been packed off to Riga—but on second thoughts, it had seemed wiser to keep her dangerous prisoner in safe custody within the country, and thus the wretched child who had known the dignity of wearing a crown but never the happiness of an hour's freedom, was torn from his parents, moved constantly from one prison to another, the most helpless and pitiable of human creatures, yet because of his royal blood the one dangerous enemy of Russia's mighty ruler. Ivan was the bugbear of her sleepless nights. Thousands of spies all over the country, at Court, in the barracks, in the ministries, were kept busy tracking down malcontents who, dissatisfied with the *régime*, demanded the restoration of Ivan.

Spies were sent abroad, to Vienna, Copenhagen, London, Paris, to nose out conspiracies between Ivan's followers and any

foreign power. These scouts brought to light a number of plots, and invented a good many more in the hope of gaining a reward, and countless suspects were sent to Siberia without even the formality of a trial.

One thing, however, was clear. If Ivan was to be rendered permanently harmless, a new successor to the throne must be found, so that the future dynasty might be firmly established and recognized by the Russian nation and the world at large. This explains Elizabeth's hurry to send for her nephew from Holstein and nominate him her heir almost as soon as she herself had mounted the throne. But Peter was delicate and ailing. He had been hardly a year in Russia when a serious illness nearly killed him, and every few weeks or so he contracted a fresh cold or fever. Supposing he were to die before Elizabeth—what then? A wife must be found for him and an heir begotten without delay, so that in the event of his premature death there would be a new Romanoff to support Elizabeth in her feud against the last remaining flower of this race, the innocent but fear-inspiring boy, Ivan, imprisoned now at Cholmogory or Raneburg. Hence Elizabeth's haste to choose a bride for Peter, hence all the urgent despatches which Brümmer wrote in her name to the Princess of Zerbst. Haste, all haste!

Now the bride had arrived; she was strong and healthy, and all political and religious difficulties had been overcome. What was to delay an immediate marriage? There was one very grave obstacle in the opinion of the doctors. At sixteen Peter looked no more than fourteen. Unlike his aunt, he showed no impatience concerning his marriage, nor could anyone in his entourage detect the faintest signs of manhood in him. He appeared to be on excellent terms with his bride-to-be, but anyone who took the trouble to listen to their conversations—and one may be sure there was no lack of eavesdroppers—can have overheard only harmless childish chatter. Catherine gave way in everything to her young bridegroom, she fell in with his moods, was quietly acquiescent to his every whim, with the result that at fifteen she was forced to do what her masculine nature had scorned at the age of five—to play with dolls. A year

was the minimum delay to which the doctors would agree—a year that seemed an eternity to Elizabeth in her impatience.

Since the marriage had temporarily to be postponed, the Empress planned another project calculated to increase confidence in the reigning family throughout the country, namely a pilgrimage to Kiev. The Grand Duke, Catherine, and the Princess of Zerbst, together with a part of their household, were sent on in advance, but Elizabeth, the voluptuous sybarite, whose indolence was the despair of her ministers and the hope of all Russia's enemies, covered the greater part of the immensely long journey on foot. Like her mother's ancestors, the peasants of Lithuania, she walked for hours on end in the shadow of her sacred images along the interminable, hot, and shadeless Russian roads, murmuring prayers as she went. She was escorted by Rasumovsky seated in his comfortable carriage, and her retinue consisted of close on two hundred and sixty followers.

To Catherine the pilgrimage was an enjoyable excursion. Their carriages were so luxuriously constructed that there was room inside them for beds, and all along the road palaces had been specially built and stocked with the choicest varieties of food and drink for the royal pilgrims. In any case, since they had to wait for the more slowly-moving Elizabeth, and since Peter's delicate health, too, must be considered, they drove for no more than a few hours each day. Yet the journey was more than a mere pleasure trip, it provided the finest, most gigantic object-lesson any future Empress can ever have received. Catherine discovered the vastness of Russia, not merely by looking at maps or poring over statistics; for days and weeks on end she drove through the countryside, saw its fields, its forests, its unending steppes. She saw it in all its immensity, in all its poverty. The roads, of course, had been repaired, bridges renewed, signposts freshly painted in honour of the royal travellers, and in all the villages peasants dressed in their Sunday costumes crowded round the carriages offering bread and salt and words of welcome. But behind them thronged the rest of the inhabitants jostling each other to get a better view of the "royal children"—faces pitted with hunger, men and women

plastered with dirt, their emaciated bodies hardly covered by their filthy rags. These were the people, the real people of Russia, ignorant, dulled, and stunted, on whose toil the vast Imperial power was built up. So far, Catherine had seen only the glittering façade—now she was faced with reality, with bodies prematurely bowed by toil and hardship, with haggard children, and wretched, tumbledown hovels which were the homes of these thousands of nameless creatures whose sour sweat paid for the splendours of Moscow and Petersburg. She was still too young to realize the injustice implicit in this contrast; she still took both sides of the picture for granted. Later, when she had grown older and very lonely, when she read the works of the great reformers and humanitarians, she was to remember this journey. Then a vision would arise before her of white-faced, ragged peasants, and her soul would swell with a noble, glowing purpose.

The journey took them three whole months. During this time the relations between the young betrothed couple grew warmer, almost affectionate. Catherine, by her cheerfulness and patience succeeded in gradually winning the confidence of the shy and awkward Peter. This boy, who had never known companionship, who all his life had had to pretend to be something he was not, could now drop all pretence and be simply himself. He grew to enjoy those confidential talks with his young bride-to-be more and more as the weeks passed, and devised ways of eluding his hated tutors, Brümmer and Bergholz. He occupied Catherine's carriage throughout most of the journey, and when they returned to Moscow he took to spending all his free hours in her company. It would probably have needed only the slightest stimulus—a word, a kiss, some trifling encouragement that can mean so much to a dawning adolescent—to transform this childish affection into love. But who was to provide that stimulus? Catherine was restrained by the natural modesty of her age and sex, and how could Peter, himself totally inexperienced in the giving or receiving of love, find the courage to change this peaceful and unexacting relationship? Like most immature creatures, they both longed for tenderness but were incapable of showing

it themselves. The experienced onlookers displayed no undue anxiety; just wait till the two of them were alone in their bedroom, they murmured wisely! This, particularly, was Elizabeth's attitude. Once again she remonstrated with the grave and doubtful doctors.

She now had another reason for wishing to hasten on the wedding, namely, her desire to be rid of the Princess of Zerbst. As always when she suffered a disappointment, her spontaneous affection turned to disgust and loathing. The mere sight of this ungrateful woman offended her, all the more so since she was unable to give vent to her real feelings. Still, she took no pains to conceal her dislike. There were no more of those cosy family talks, no more displays of sentiment toward the sister of her "unforgettable bridegroom". The Princess rarely saw Elizabeth—she was allowed to kiss her hand at official receptions, and that was all.

Why then did she not return to Zerbst? Catherine had been given her own household, and was in any case removed as far as possible from the sphere of her mother's influence. The Princess's official mission was at an end, and her secret mission had ended in sorry disaster. Moreover, Christian August was impatiently insisting on her return in every letter. She had other children at home; good sense, tact, and her duty as a wife and mother all demanded her departure. But in spite of this she stayed on in Russia; a reason, stronger than all the others, held her there, one that can be read between the lines of Catherine's *Memoirs*. We learn from these that after the breaking up of her political cabal, the Princess of Zerbst was frequently seen in the company of the Prince and Princess of Hessen-Homburg and of the Princess's brother, the fascinating Count Betsky, and that this association was an unpopular one. We gather from various letters of the period that this disapproval had other than merely political grounds. Catherine tells us that her mother showed great reluctance to join in the pilgrimage to Kiev, that she was bad-tempered and irritable throughout the whole journey, so much so that on one occasion she very nearly boxed the ears of her future son-in-law for some trifling misdemeanour,

and that hardly a day passed when she did not quarrel with one or other of the ladies-in-waiting. We know, too, that Count Betsky had not been invited to take part in the pilgrimage—a notable omission. And finally we discover the clue to all these riddles in a single line—the postscript to a despatch sent by the ambassador Rosenberg to Count Uhl in Vienna, dated the sixteenth of November: “The most secret information reports that the old Princess of Zerbst has succumbed to temptation and is pregnant.”

One may assume that this “secret information” was known to the entire Court, and that the Court was deeply scandalized. Here indeed was a subject for hilarity—the poor Princess of Zerbst who had come to Russia to take care of her daughter and who had taken so little care of herself!—and of chagrin for Elizabeth, who, though she denied herself no indulgence, was a dragon for the respectability of her Court, and particularly of her own family.

In spite of the discretion of her *Memoirs*, it is plain that Catherine knew perfectly well what was happening. But, since she had no wish either to judge her own mother or to rouse the indignation of the moralists, she took by far the wisest course, and pretended to know nothing. This was all the more easy since her head at the moment was full of quite other matters than her mother's love affairs. She was at that exciting stage in her development when her feminine consciousness was beginning to waken. No sooner had the Court returned from its pious pilgrimage than it flung itself heart and soul into a whirling round of gaiety. Receptions, banquets, balls, masquerades followed each other thick and fast, there was hardly an evening when Catherine did not find an excuse for wearing a magnificent dress, dancing in a daring costume; hardly an hour passed in which she was not made to feel that she was being a success. Could there really have been a time when she had believed herself to be ugly, and because of this conviction had neglected her appearance? Now she was continually being told that she was a budding beauty and, what was more, a person of charm, whose quick intelligence amazed all those she met. True, a

certain amount of calculated flattery leavened these compliments; after all, she was the second lady of the land, and one day—perhaps quite soon, for it was impossible to say how long Elizabeth's constitution would be able to withstand the constant alternations between asceticism and indulgence to which she subjected it—she would be the first. Catherine was shrewd enough to realize all this, yet she could feel in every fibre of her being that a part of this adulation, at any rate, was given not to the future Empress, but to the young girl with her dazzling white skin, her sparkling black eyes, her natural gaiety that could so successfully combine liveliness with decorum, cheerfulness with gravity, abandonment with dignity. Enemies? Of course she had enemies as well. Who, in a station of such envied eminence, could have been without enemies? There was Bestushev and his clique, there were the soured Court ladies who saw themselves being edged out of the limelight, there was that army of envious parasites who suspect they are being cheated wherever favours are unequally distributed, that is to say, at every royal Court. But Catherine had inherited nothing of her mother's quarrelsome and intrigue-loving character, no trace of her petty meanness. It never entered her head to form an alliance with her new friends against her enemies, or to seek to injure her enemies in any way. On the contrary, she took particular pains, she looked upon it as a matter of pride to try and win the approval of the very people who disliked her, and, even if she was not always successful at first, she succeeded in disarming her severest critics by her unfailing charm and friendliness. Every day the circle of her friends grew larger. Her natural high spirits and her delight in her own good fortune, combined with the vigour and vitality of a healthy young animal, gave her a zest for life which found an outlet—since as yet it was offered no alternative—in wild and boisterous games with the younger of her ladies-in-waiting.

The balls at Elizabeth's Court were usually very stiff affairs. The conventional etiquette adopted on these occasions had been learned and imported from Paris, but it was still too unfamiliar to permit of a very natural application. The Empress planned

her masquerades on original lines—all the men had to appear dressed as women, and the women as men. The idea was not altogether popular, least of all with the men, who found great difficulty in managing the enormous hooped skirts, frequently tripped, and to the general amusement were unable to pick themselves up again. There was, however, a special reason for this somewhat questionable caprice of Elizabeth's. Though she was by no means slender, all contemporary opinions agree that she looked her best in trousers, for her full-bosomed and orientally voluptuous figure was supported on a pair of slim, well-shaped legs. There was no other way in which she could display these magnificent legs, and her vanity demanded that they should not remain hidden. Her vanity demanded not only that she should be the most powerful, but the most beautiful woman of her empire; she could never tolerate hearing another's beauty praised in her presence. Little Catherine's triumphs naturally had not escaped her, and already the first cloud of jealousy—a quite impersonal feminine jealousy—began to drift across the sun of her maternal tenderness. Her annoyance sought and soon found a way to express itself. One evening she was sitting in the royal box at the Opera, facing the box where Catherine, a picture of glowing youth, was talking animatedly to Peter. Could this be the same shy, spiky girl who had come to Russia barely a year ago, who had developed into a self-confident woman of the world in that short time? Impulsively as was her habit the Empress flared up in anger, seized on the first best grievance that came to hand, and as if it were something that could brook no delay, sent her companion, Lestoque, to Catherine to convey her grave displeasure. Lestoque, servile as ever, performed his mission so well that Peter and everyone within earshot was informed of the reason for the Empress's disapproval, and Elizabeth, from her box opposite, had the satisfaction of seeing the gay laughter fade from Catherine's face, seeing her grow pale, scared, and struggle to suppress her tears.

What had happened? What crime had been committed by the unfortunate girl whose one thought was to please everybody, and above all the Empress? She had exceeded her

pocket money to the extent of two thousand roubles. "That is the way to drain all one's resources," was the Empress's rebuke. The sum was so absurd in view of Elizabeth's own extravagance, as well as her generosity, that the reprimand was obviously an excuse to cloak a different grievance. Nevertheless it is interesting to know how Catherine spent her very liberal allowance of pocket money. She had used a part of it to replenish her wardrobe—she had come to Russia almost literally with no more than she stood up in; a part of it had been sent to Zerbst for her brother; but the greater part had been spent in buying presents. She had discovered that the most effective way of putting a stop to the constant bickerings between her mother and Peter was, since they were both children at heart, to give them presents. She had noticed, too, that people as a whole were not averse to accepting gifts, and so, being anxious to find favour with all those about her, she saw no reason to scorn this eminently simple method of achieving her purpose. Some could be bribed with a smile, others with a small gift. She had, during her first year in Russia, learned not only the language but something of the mentality of the Russians.

This incident cast only a slight, passing shadow; very soon Elizabeth's affection for the girl triumphed. On the fifteenth of December, the Court migrated from Moscow to Petersburg. The Empress herself wrapped Catherine's furs and rugs about her, and, thinking these insufficient protection from the cold, took off her own magnificent ermine cloak and threw it over Catherine's shoulders. What had happened in the meantime to pacify and soften her? The Grand Duke had had an attack of chickenpox, and both she and Catherine had trembled for his life.

Soon they were to be united even more closely by this fear. Four days' journey from Moscow, at the village of Chotilovo, the Grand Duke fell ill again, this time with smallpox. The physician, Boerhave, thrust Catherine firmly from the sickroom and ordered her to proceed to Petersburg with her mother. In the sledge Catherine gave way to her despair. Was there the

faintest hope that the Grand Duke, hardly convalescent from his last illness, could survive the ravages of this dreadful disease? She suddenly realized that without Peter she was nothing, a nobody, that all the honours which had been heaped upon her were meant for the Grand Duke's bride, for the wife of the future Czar, that the power she believed she held so firmly in her hand was merely credit advanced on the security of her future position, that everything, in short, which had made her so supremely happy and contented depended on the feeble youth who now lay fighting sickness, pain, and death.

Elizabeth, who had travelled in advance without breaking her journey, was already in Petersburg when the news of the Grand Duke's illness reached her. She jumped immediately into her sledge and raced back to Chotilovo, terror gripping at her heart. Suppose Peter were to die without leaving an heir? He would take Elizabeth's peace, Elizabeth's security, to the grave with him, and the spectre of the child Ivan, no matter in what prison he was immured, would return to haunt her: Ivan, her only legitimate successor—no, Ivan the rightful Czar, who had been crowned before Elizabeth usurped his throne.

Two sledges tore through the endless snow-clad Russian landscape; in each sat a weeping, terrified woman. Near Novgorod they met, stopped, the windows were lowered, and the desperate Elizabeth gazed out at the equally distraught Catherine. A warm wave of sympathy flowed through the icy December air from one carriage window to the other; only the barest greeting was exchanged; Catherine reported the latest news of the Grand Duke's condition, then the Empress gave the signal to proceed—and the sledges raced on.

Elizabeth insisted on nursing the Grand Duke herself. Anxiety for his life, which became almost indistinguishable from tender love, had changed her overnight. The voluptuous sybarite, whom all the luxury of the western world, all the extravagant splendour of the east could not satisfy, lived for the next six weeks in a wretched farmhouse that had first to be made wind and rain-proof with rags, straw, or whatever came to hand; the laziest of all women, accustomed to sleeping till late in the

day, hardly removed her clothes to lie down; she who cared for nothing so much as the preservation of her beauty, now undertook all the menial tasks of a sick-nurse. And in the intervals of her labours she found time to send messengers twice daily to the only creature she knew shared her anxiety for the invalid, to Catherine. Though many thousands of miles of desolate country lay between them, the two women were closer in spirit during those anxious days of waiting than they had ever been or would ever be again.

True, Catherine in Petersburg had much to distract her thoughts. For one thing, she was having a difficult time with her mother. The Empress had provided her with a suite of apartments in Petersburg which were separated from those of her mother by a large room. The Empress had her reasons for this, and the Princess of Zerbst knew perfectly well what they were. Quite rightly she interpreted this arrangement as an unspoken criticism of her own conduct and an attempt to humiliate her. She vented her anger on her innocent but defenceless daughter, and during those dark and stormy days every conceivable insult was hurled at the poor girl's head. One morning, Fräulein Schenk rushed excitedly into Catherine's room to tell her that the Princess had fallen into a dead faint. Catherine hurried to her mother's room and found her lying on a mattress, deathly pale but fully conscious. As soon as her eyes fell on her daughter, the Princess began to abuse her violently, and still screaming abuse she chased her from the room. These signs all seem to indicate that she had reached the last phase of her gallant adventure with Count Betzky, but we can draw no definite conclusions for lack of authentic evidence.

Catherine spent her first weeks in Petersburg waiting for the messengers from Chotilovo. She shut herself in her rooms, while in the state apartments, banquets, balls, and masquerades were in full swing undeterred by the absence of the Empress. At last the longed-for news from Elizabeth arrived: "To-day I can inform you to our joy that, God be praised, we may hope for his recovery." No sooner had she read this letter than the natural gaiety of Catherine's years and temperament reasserted itself;

that very same evening she escaped from her querulous mother and attended a masquerade. At her appearance, the whole room flocked to her side—the danger was over, the Grand Duke would recover, the present was fair, but the future would be a thousand times fairer. Now that she had embarked once more on a round of pleasure, there was no limit to her enjoyment; the Moscow days repeated themselves; every evening saw a fresh ball or masquerade, every evening brought a fresh triumph. And this time there was no Elizabeth to dim her radiant beauty with the forbidding shadow of authority.

In the midst of this whirl of gaiety, Catherine met Count Gyllenborg for the second time, and this second meeting proved to be even more significant than the first. Four years ago, in Hamburg, he had been the only one to recognize a spark of greatness in the timid and neglected child, the only one who had offered her any encouragement. When he saw her again, surrounded by admirers, he was disappointed in her. He had once called her little philosopher, but now he saw the little philosopher dancing indefatigably, taking part with every sign of enjoyment in vapid conversations, drinking in the stale compliments of her flatterers. He was disappointed, and he made no secret of it. Did she really ask no more of herself than to be beautiful and admired? Did her soul aspire no higher than this purely superficial eminence which she had attained by a political alliance? Far from taking his reproaches with a bad grace, Catherine recognized them as the sincerest form of flattery. This man expected more of her than she had yet achieved. She was instantly inflamed with a desire to prove herself equal to this demand also, and within a few days, she had written for Gyllenborg *The Self-portrait of a Fifteen-year-old Philosopher*. She was trying to show him that, in spite of the many temptations to idle conceit, she was not lacking in thoughtfulness and self-knowledge. Her attempt was successful: Gyllenborg was delighted with the essay and replied with a twelve-page letter in which he advised the future Empress of Russia to develop her mind and strengthen her soul. In place of the trashy novels with which she was supplied, he recommended the writings of

Plutarch, the discourses of Cicero, and above all the works of Montesquieu to her attention. From him she first heard the name of Voltaire. A seed had fallen into fruitful soil; it would begin to grow when the time was ripe. As yet it was too early.

At the beginning of February the Grand Duke, restored to health at last, arrived with the Empress in Petersburg. Catherine met him in the great reception hall, after a six weeks' separation during which he had been nearer to death than to life. It was five o'clock in the afternoon and the light was already dim, but not dim enough to hide the ravages which the disease had wrought on his face, nor the horror that came into Catherine's own when she saw them. Peter had never been strikingly handsome, but he had at least been able to boast a certain wan prettiness and delicate appealing features. Now these features were coarsened almost to the point of unrecognition, his face was bloated and thickly scarred with still unhealed pockmarks. He went towards his bride, and said with a twisted smile: "Do you recognize me?" Catherine stammered a few forced words of congratulation on his recovery, and later retired to her room where she broke into an uncontrollable and endless fit of sobbing.

Her reaction was a perfectly natural and healthy one, yet it must be admitted that, in handling this situation on which her future relationship to Peter depended, she failed. It is understandable that a normal young girl, however pleased she might be at the recovery of her betrothed, should shrink from his horrible disfigurement; it is understandable that all her determination, all her self-control, all her pity, should suffice only to mask her shudders and bring a few conventional words to her lips. And yet the moment demanded more, it demanded something quite different, something that Catherine did not possess, the one quality that was lacking in her rich and varied nature: warm, overflowing, heartfelt compassion.

All his life Peter Feodorovitch had been a solitary, twisted creature; he had never known an intimate friend, never kept a diary, and would most likely have been incapable of confiding to either what went on deep under the surface of his life. It

was more than likely that he never stopped to consider how this reunion must affect him, yet it requires little imagination to know what the effect must have been; this boy, who from his infancy had been painfully aware of his own unfitness for the demands made on him, who, in his relations with women, had shown the timidity bred of a knowledge of his own insufficiency, confronted his bride with the knowledge that a new and repulsive ugliness was added to the list of his handicaps. Till then, she had been the only living creature who had been willing to accept him as he was, with whom he could be perfectly natural, the only playmate of his bleak and lonely youth. "Do you recognize me?" he had asked. Nothing could have betrayed more clearly his realization of his changed appearance, and his dread of its effect upon others. One friendly smile, one word of love could have freed him. That word was not spoken. With the conventional phrases she forced from her lips Catherine destroyed in a single second all that months of patient perseverance, wisdom, instinct, tact, and goodwill had achieved. The hesitant bud needing only a breath of warmth to coax it into a flower of love was blighted by the chill frost of that greeting; the unloved boy's confidence in Catherine's understanding was shattered; his trusted playmate had become an enemy.

He was hardly aware of the change, but as the days passed it became more and more apparent. He saw a great deal of Catherine at Petersburg, where his apartments adjoined hers, but he never remained with her for long, preferring the company of his servants. He would order them to put on uniforms and amused himself by drilling them. Even as a child, uniforms, military drill, and words of command had helped him more than anything else to forget his sense of inferiority and unmanliness. Now that he was again acutely conscious of being despised, he sought relief from the old remedy. These ridiculous indoor parades with a handful of dressed-up servants were simply an expression of his deep despondency, and of a renewed and vigorous protest against his marriage.

Catherine was puzzled and wounded by this new attitude of

Peter's. She was not conscious of having committed any crime, she would have been amazed to learn that she had offended and alienated him. Her pride forced her to reply to his open coolness by a corresponding reserve on her own side. But pride and reserve could only strengthen Peter's belief that he had become repulsive to her by his ugliness, his sense of discouragement and loneliness was aggravated and his spite increased.

It was at this point that preparations for the wedding were begun. Elizabeth's patience was exhausted, the anxiety over Peter's illness, that nightmare dash to Chotilovo still haunted her. In vain did the doctors protest that the Grand Duke was still too young, too weak, not yet recovered from the effects of his illness; in vain did Stehlin assure her that his charge was far too immature to be capable of founding a family, that his mentality was that of a child, that he played with dolls when he went to bed. They implored the Empress to wait a year, at least another year; but it so happened that a few days previously a man was discovered hiding in her wardrobe with an open knife in his hand, and the most agonizing torture had been unable to make him confess who his confederates were or who had employed him. Every day spies brought fresh information of discontent, of new adherents to Ivan's cause. What was the use of issuing ukase after ukase, burning all papers relating to Ivan and his mother, recalling coins bearing the imprint of the baby Czar's features under pain of death, when the succession hung upon so slender a thread as the health of the Grand Duke Peter? In a year's time a second fatal illness might carry him off, but in a year's time there might be a small heir, stronger and healthier than Peter, as strong and healthy as Catherine. After all, Peter was seventeen, and even if he was still too young to be the head of a family or to grasp the real significance of marriage, he could learn that later, it was of less immediate importance. The important thing was that he, the last of the Romanoffs (except for the dreaded Ivan), should beget a son and thus consolidate Elizabeth's position on the throne.

The date of the wedding was fixed for the first of July. Elizabeth had decided that this was to be the grandest wedding ever known in Russia; her own people and the whole world must witness a display of unique magnificence which would convince them that the Russian throne was the most powerful and permanent of institutions. The preparations were on so vast a scale—the celebrations were to last for ten whole days—that they occupied all the Empress's time and attention. This was something that appealed to her vanity, her oriental love of display, her instinct for showmanship. She had no time or interest for anything else, she neglected affairs of state, ignored her ministers, the most important documents remained unread, the most important decisions were postponed. On the other hand, as early as March, an ukase was issued ordering all persons of rank to provide themselves with rich clothes and carriages to be drawn by six horses, for the wedding. It was particularly stated that persons of highest and secondary rank "must provide two liveried footmen and eight to twelve servants, in any case not less than eight, as well as two fast runners and, if possible, one or two pages and two huntsmen. Persons of tertiary rank, six servants, two fast runners, etc. . . ." The Russian Ambassador in Paris was requested to report, as nearly as he could, details of the celebrations which had attended the wedding of the Dauphin and the Spanish Infanta, and in due course a faithful account of the French ceremony arrived, complete with an enumeration of the bridal retinue and the descriptions of eye-witnesses. Edicts travelled to the remotest corners of Russia requisitioning fruit and wines, boats and carriages, to be sent to Petersburg.

While herds of cattle were being driven towards the capital, and hundred of carts piled with poultry, mead and wine casks rumbled over the country roads, while ships laden with cloth from England, with ready-made liveries from Paris, with carriages from Germany, arrived daily in the harbours, while the Empress and the whole of Russia were busy preparing for the wedding, the bridegroom, Peter, was being enlightened by his favourite servant Rumber, a one-time private in the Swedish

Dragoons, as to the true facts of marriage. Rumber, who had left a wife behind him in his native Sweden, spoke with authority. A wife must not dare so much as to breathe in her husband's presence; only a fool would allow his wife to have opinions of her own; a few well-timed bangs on the head were to be recommended, and so on. Peter liked listening to this kind of talk, and he enjoyed even more passing it on to Catherine with a malicious grin. She was not to imagine he was courting her; he had no need of her love—she must learn to fear him. It had been said of Richard III, "since he cannot prove a lover, he is determined to prove a villain." Peter, too, was determined to prove a bad husband, because he no longer had the courage to try and win Catherine's love.

And now, to her aversion for his physical ugliness which she might soon have overcome, there was added a new uneasiness concerning his character. She began to feel frightened of this marriage, she wept frequently, and it took all the ingenuity of her waiting-women to restore her to cheerfulness. They were not yet married, but already a very marked antipathy was growing up between the two. A hint of this came to Elizabeth's ears. She furiously dismissed Rumber, and, more than that, had him locked up. She redoubled her friendliness to Catherine, singling her out for special favour on every possible occasion. But, in the main, she saw only what she wanted to see, what she was obliged to see; the situation caused her no grave alarm. The Grand Duke was backward for his age, but marriage would soon make a man of him. Once he was married he would soon cease playing with dolls; once the lively and intelligent Catherine was his wife, he would stop making boon companions of his servants.

A few days later, the immature Peter was formally declared to be of age and given the title of reigning Duke of Holstein. This was a trifling honour for the future ruler of Russia's vast empire, but to the timid, faint-hearted lad it had enormous significance. Stehlin records that the Grand Duke read aloud the document of his nomination, and said to Brümmer: "At last my wish has been fulfilled. You have dominated me long enough; now it is

my turn to give orders. I shall take steps to have her sent back to Holstein as soon as possible." He would probably have liked nothing better than to be allowed to return to Holstein himself, to become an insignificant princeling and a vassal of his idol, Frederick of Prussia. Holstein was dear to his heart because it asked no more of him than he felt himself capable of giving. While thousands of people were busy establishing his position as heir-apparent to the Russian throne, while contributions for the magnificent wedding-ceremony continued to pour in from every corner of the empire, while his name was on the lips of millions of patriotic Russians, Peter surrounded himself with a group of Holstein soldiers, devoted himself exclusively to Holstein affairs, and had thoughts for nothing but Holstein. At a time when sermons describing the romantic love of the young royal couple, which was soon to be sanctified by the holy bonds of matrimony, were being preached from pulpits all over the country to the greedy ears of peasants and small townspeople, when prayers for the success and endurance of the marriage were being offered up in thousands of churches, Peter sent a message to his betrothed to say that he was unable to visit her because his apartments at the Summer Palace were too far from hers. It was typical of the unfortunate Peter's fate that he was always given more than he wanted—the greatest country in Europe for his kingdom, and the most remarkable woman of her time for his wife.

The extent of the preparations and the difficulties of transport had forced even the impatient Elizabeth to postpone the marriage for a few weeks. At last the date was fixed for the twenty-first of August. Three days before the ceremony heralds rode through the streets of Petersburg beating drums to call out the citizens. But they needed no warning, they were already on tiptoe with excitement. Tables laden with food had been set out in the Admiralty Square, fountains spouted wine, there was no end to the wonders. The procession from the Winter Palace to the Church of Our Lady of Kazan lasted from ten in the morning till one in the afternoon. The carriage in which the Empress sat with the bridal pair was drawn by eight horses led by grooms,

a hundred and twenty carriages followed it, accompanied by countless runners, foot-soldiers, lackeys, and mounted officers. Catherine wore a narrow diamond crown on her unpowdered hair and a dress of silver brocade with a hem of gold tinsel that reached half-way up the skirt. Even her mother admitted that she looked radiantly lovely. "The procession infinitely surpasses anything I have ever seen," the English ambassador reported. The ceremony was performed by Simon Todorsky, Catherine's teacher and confessor, and lasted a full three hours. The celebrations, receptions, banquets, comedies, operas, illuminations and firework displays continued for ten days. The festivities ended with a curious ritual originally devised by Peter the Great, and performed for the first and last time that year, namely, the launching of "the little grandfather of the Russian Navy", the famous little boat which had belonged to Peter the Great. This was kept safely stored in the Peter Paul Prison, being far too old and rotten to be floated. It was moved on to the deck of a larger vessel that was hung with crimson cloth right down to the surface of the water, and then, escorted by numerous rowing boats, naval sloops, by the heads of the Admiralty, the Empress and the bridal couple, the little boat was borne down the Neva as far as the Alexander Nevsky Cloister, where the Archbishop sprinkled it with holy water while the royal flag was hoisted, and Elizabeth solemnly kissed the portrait of her father that hung on board. The symbolical significance of this very elaborate ritual was clear: Elizabeth was renewing her solemn allegiance to the ideals of Peter the Great, an allegiance in which the newly-married pair were also included.

"It was perhaps the gayest marriage that has ever been celebrated in Europe," the Princess of Zerbst wrote to her husband. That may have been true, if two of the participants are excepted from the general gaiety: Peter and Catherine.

## CHAPTER V

### LONELINESS

" . . . after that the Empress escorted the Grand Duke and me to our apartment, the ladies undressed me and conducted me to bed between nine and ten o'clock. I begged the Princess of Hessen to stay with me a little while, but she would not consent . . . I remained alone for more than two hours not knowing what I ought to do. Should I get up again? Should I remain in bed? . . . At last my new lady-in-waiting, Frau Kruse, came to me and reported with great merriment that the Grand Duke was waiting for his supper which was about to be carried up to him. After His Imperial Highness had made a good meal, he came to bed, and when he had lain down, he began to talk about how it would amuse his valets to see us in bed together. He then fell asleep and slept very comfortably until the following morning . . . The next day Frau Kruse tried to question us about our wedding night. But her hopes proved in vain. And things remained in this state without the slightest change, during the following nine years."

These are the closing words of Catherine's account of her wedding night, which concludes the First Part of the *Memoirs*.

Catherine herself lifted the veil and revealed the intimacies of her boudoir to the eyes of the curious. She had a reason for this. It was not lack of modesty. She was never immodest. Even in the years to come, when her love affairs were notorious throughout Europe, she was always reticent, almost prudish in conversation, in her letters, and in her diaries. She never alluded by a single word to the many passionate hours that fell to her lot in later life. In this one instance only, when she described the painful humiliations of her married life, did she throw aside discretion, and, proudly ignoring the mortification to her pride,

frankly admit things which would have caused any other woman the deepest chagrin. She did this deliberately. Catherine's memoirs were written for her dearly beloved grandchild, Alexander, and they were written at a time when she herself was advanced in years, an old woman with a load of guilt on her shoulders. She had broken her marriage vows, had driven her husband from the throne, and as to his assassination, the least that can be said is that she left it unavenged; her life was notorious, a public scandal, an offence against morality and decency. Nobody dared accuse her openly so long as she held the reins of power in her strong hands; but she knew that once her eyes were closed hundreds of voices both in Russia and abroad would be raised to denounce her. Historians and gossipmongers, moralists and hypocrites would give a name to her sins, would enumerate her lovers, insult and besmirch her memory, drag it in the mud, through which, though with her head held high, she had often had to walk. These detractors would be right—right as far as facts went—but they would be wrong because they had no knowledge of what lay behind the facts. The grandson she loved so dearly should be her judge, and for him she would put up her defence. Acting as her own counsel, without mercy or false modesty, as behoves counsel, she traced the path which on the one hand had led to the dizzy heights of absolute power, and on the other to the depths of guilt—the thorny path beset with humiliations and insults which began in the most fantastic of bridal chambers and ended with the bloody tragedy of Ropsha.

It began like a French farce, or a bawdy story by Boccaccio: the young husband played with dolls in the marital bed and the young wife, if she was to observe her oath of obedience and docility in all things, had no alternative but to join the game. They had to resort to countless subterfuges to hide the dolls during the daytime, for they both knew that the Empress would be furious if she discovered how the young couple spent their nights—the couple whose wedding had been celebrated with such pomp before the eyes of all Europe. It was the most grotesque, the most ridiculous and farcical situation—these

two children perpetually on their guard lest they should be caught at the crime of playing with dolls!

But surely, apart from causing the Empress displeasure, it was a perfectly harmless occupation? There must have been something rather touching in this spectacle of two children, ignorant as yet of any knowledge of passion, playing their innocent games? Perhaps the physicians were right, perhaps Peter, in spite of his seventeen years, was not fully grown to manhood, and the explanations of his tutors, the bawdy conversation of his lackeys, had done no more than enlighten him about facts which only experience could render real. . . . This was more or less Frau Kruse's opinion, as she fruitlessly interrogated the young wife every morning, and in the early days Catherine shared that opinion too. She still tried to win the confidence and love of her husband by complete docility and good-tempered humouring of all his whims. Peter had, of course, to be with his wife night and day during the honeymoon, but it did not occur to him to apply the advice of Rumber—advice which may have appealed to his imagination, but which he was certainly not capable of putting into action. He was never openly and directly aggressive. He still seemed to be the harmless, childish playmate, delighted to have at his side, instead of tutors and spies, an unassuming creature in whose presence he need wear no mask. No rough or unkind word ever passed his lips. Yet only a fortnight after the wedding, while the magnificence of the celebrations was still being discussed in every house in the city, while guests from distant towns were still on the road travelling homewards, and the tradesmen were awaiting payment of their bills—the young husband confessed to his wife that he had fallen in love with one of her ladies-in-waiting. He gave her a detailed description of the charms of Fräulein Karr. Not content with this, he confided his new passion to one of his lackeys. "He was tactful as a shot from a gun," wrote Catherine, who happened to enter the room just as he was telling the manservant that the Grand Duchess was not to be compared with the enchanting Fräulein Karr!

Whether this passion was real, or whether Peter was merely deceiving himself and others in order to disguise his lack of virility toward his wife, it served to rob the nightly doll-games of their "innocence." Peter might be mentally as well as physically backward, but he had sufficient intelligence (if intelligence were needed) to realize how deeply he was insulting Catherine when he chose her bed, which he only used for childish games, as the place to tell her of his love for another woman! There can be no doubt that he *wished* to insult her, wished to humiliate her, and in the space of a few weeks he succeeded so well that in her new grief Catherine entirely forgot all the injuries her mother had ever done her. She shed bitter tears when the Princess prepared to set out on her homeward journey.

This journey was not entirely voluntary. Elizabeth had been obliged to hint to the Princess that there was no longer any reason to delay her departure, and that horses had already been provided for her at all stages along the route. Up to the very last the Princess continued to behave in an unpleasantly suspicious manner, to intrigue, to antagonize Bestushev, and to correspond with Frederick II. To be sure her letters were no longer intercepted but, at Elizabeth's command, were unceremoniously opened, and in most cases the original quite calmly retained. The Princess described her parting from Elizabeth as follows:

Our farewell was very moving. For me in particular it was almost impossible to take leave of Her Imperial Majesty, and this great monarch, on her side, paid me the honour of being so much moved that the courtiers present were also deeply affected. Farewell was said innumerable times and finally this most gracious of rulers accompanied me to the stairway with tears and expressions of tenderness and kindness.

Quite a different description of the parting is given by an eyewitness. The English ambassador, Hyndford, wrote in his despatch dated October 1, 1745:

When the Princess took leave of the Empress, she implored her in floods of tears to forgive her if she had in any way

offended Her Imperial Majesty. The Empress replied that it would now seem to be rather late for such considerations, and if she had had such wise thoughts earlier, it would have been better for her.

The probabilities are all in favour of Hyndford's account. Nevertheless the Princess and her retinue departed laden with rich presents, and she was also provided with gifts to take back to the worthy Christian August, as well as 60,000 roubles in cash to enable her to pay her debts in Russia before she left. (Unfortunately these debts amounted to almost double the sum. Catherine assumed responsibility for the remainder and thus laid the foundation of a burden of debt which for the next seventeen years was to torment her and lead her into one obligation after another.) The Princess, however, left Petersburg in a moderately good humour. She travelled slowly and at her ease, so that it was twelve days before she reached Riga, where Elizabeth's revenge finally overtook her. It must be confessed that it was a revenge of the most refined malice. At Riga the Princess was handed a letter from Elizabeth which read as follows: "I consider it necessary to enjoin you to impress upon His Majesty the King of Prussia, when you arrive in Berlin, that it would please me if he were to recall his plenipotentiary minister, Baron Mardefeld." Elizabeth's wish to have the Prussian ambassador recalled had nothing to do with the Princess Johanna, but arose out of Russia's foreign policy during the second Silesian War. There were, of course, a hundred other ways in which Elizabeth could have informed Frederick of her decision; her choice of the Princess Johanna to perform this painful mission was a kind of punishment. While she had been in Russia the Princess had intrigued in the interests of the Prussian king, now she herself was obliged to inform the king with what ill success her efforts had met. It was the worst possible disaster that could have befallen the poor creature. She had gone to Russia with the secret object of bringing about Bestushev's fall; she returned with the official mission of demanding the recall of the German ambassador.

Hardly had her mother departed when an incident occurred,

trifling enough in itself, yet sufficiently important as a symptom to disquiet Catherine exceedingly and for a very good reason. The Empress removed from Catherine's household a young Esthonian called Maria Petrovna Shukov, a lively young girl of seventeen to whom Catherine had become warmly attached. Elizabeth excused her action by saying that the Princess had asked her before her departure to dismiss Shukov because the close friendship between the two girls, who were of the same age, was undesirable. Whether the Princess actually said this cannot be proved, nor is it of any great importance. If it was not the Princess, then Frau Kruse or someone else had told the Empress of the girls' friendship, and the reason for Elizabeth's prompt action on hearing of it is obvious. She knew, of course, what was happening in the Grand Ducal bedchamber—or rather, what was not happening. Such things cannot be kept a secret at Court, particularly not at a Court which was so anxious to see the marriage consummated and a future heir on the way. The most indelicate form of espionage, that of using lackeys as spies, was accepted as a matter of course by Elizabeth in the interests of the dynasty. Two months had passed since the wedding and still her watch-dogs had nothing reassuring to report. The impulsive and impatient Empress naturally seized upon the first explanation that was brought to her notice, and without any further investigation—which would in any case have been somewhat embarrassing—removed the all too confidential friend from Catherine's society.

To a despotic Russian Empress, accustomed to banishing tens of thousands of her subjects summarily to Siberia every year, this decision was so trifling that she saw no reason for wasting any thought on it. But its effect on Catherine was very different. Catherine was not conscious of any guilt, she knew that the Shukov was innocent, and her loyal nature could not endure that a person should be insulted and injured simply on her account. She took the trouble of having money sent to the girl, and tried to get her suitably married—all of which naturally increased the suspicion against herself and heightened Elizabeth's anger against the Shukov. Eventually

the poor creature, together with the husband Catherine had found for her, was banished to Astrakan.

This episode in itself would be of little importance had it not thrown so vivid a light on Catherine's position, and served as an introduction to an endless succession of similar and even harsher measures. In a lightning flash Catherine realized that although she was Grand Duchess and "Her Imperial Highness", in spite of her diamonds, the pomp which surrounded her, and her numerous flatterers, she had even less freedom and independence in her new home than she had had in the old, and that the tyranny of her mother had been replaced by the far more despotic authority of Elizabeth. (The coincidence that on the very day she was freed from her mother's tyranny she should first taste Elizabeth's, is one of the ironies that life permits itself; a novelist would not have risked it.) That she stood nearer the throne than any other woman in the land did not make her more free, but a thousand times more dependent, more restricted in her actions than the wife of the poorest citizen. Elizabeth had her every movement watched by a hundred indiscreet, prying eyes, she subjected the young wife to the interrogation, censure, and admonition of a hundred tongues—of ladies of the Court, waiting-women, even lackeys. She was informed that she dressed too grandly for Elizabeth's liking, or too simply; she rose too late, spent too much time at her mirror, was too presumptuous, or bad-tempered. In a thousand humiliating, hurtful and offensive ways, Elizabeth gave Catherine to understand that she was falling day by day into ever deeper disgrace. Elizabeth was a woman accustomed to having her own way in everything, and that without delay. These two impudent Grand Ducal children were thwarting her. She had done everything in her power for them; had loaded them with kindness and gifts, had exalted them in the eyes of the world, had given them the most magnificent wedding of the century, she had even really taken them to her heart—all in the hope

of a speedy fulfilment of her wish for an heir. Now that she found her hopes frustrated her anger knew no bounds, and practically the whole Grand Ducal household was kept busy trying to ferret out which of the pair was responsible for this intolerable state of affairs. Was it conceivable that Catherine, with her radiant beauty, her gaiety and charm, should leave the eighteen-year-old Peter entirely cold? Was it not far more likely that Peter's ugliness and disagreeable nature repelled his wife, and that she expressed her antipathy and repugnance in the privacy of their bedroom by repulsing the young man's shy overtures? If this were not so, then the boy's virility must be completely despaired of, and all hope of a legitimate heir to the throne abandoned!

D'Allion, De la Chétardie's successor, wrote in his despatch of February 26th, 1747, six months after the wedding: "*Le grand duc n'a pas encore fait voir à sa femme qu'il fut homme.*" It is almost certain that Peter had no mistresses at this time.

Nevertheless, it cannot be said that he was completely sexless. In proof of this there were his frequent infatuations for one or other of the ladies of the Court (after the Lapouchin he pursued the Karr, and after the Karr, the Korff), and his remark on his marriage night: "It will amuse the valet to see us both in bed." This remark suggests not only a knowledge of sexual matters but a fairly lively if somewhat perverted imagination. To the same premature, almost senile type of perversion we may attribute the fact that nothing pleased him better than Catherine's friendship with his favourite attendant, Tchernishov. He encouraged Tchernishov in all sorts of intimacies with Catherine, and would send him with trivial messages to her several times a day. Indeed, he carried the game so far that the young man, justifiably apprehensive for his personal safety, ventured to say on one occasion: "His Imperial Majesty should bear in mind that the Grand Duchess is not Madame Tchernishov." For months he talked to his wife only of Tchernishov, of his good looks, his devotion, until finally one of the few well-disposed persons in her entourage, the old valet Timofei, drew Catherine's

attention to the danger of her position: the whole household was already gossiping of her love for the handsome Tchernishov. This young man had a brother and a cousin of the same name, both of whom were in Peter's service, and the malicious gossip-mongers at Court, who were fully aware that things were not as they should be with the newly-married pair, did not hesitate to credit all three with being Catherine's lovers. Peter's perverse fantasies, in which lackeys and onlookers always played a part, and which were always based on a desire to humiliate someone (they served the same end as the tactless stories he told of his passions for other women), did not stop short at his own wife. They aspired even to the sacred person of his Imperial aunt. One day, discovering that his bedroom adjoined one of her private apartments, he bored holes in the communicating door and saw Elizabeth with her favourite, Rasumovsky. He immediately called his ladies and gentlemen to his room and ordered chairs and benches to be placed before the perforated door, so that they could all comfortably enjoy the spectacle of their monarch's intimacy with her lover in his brocade nightshirt.

These were not the actions of an unerotic man. His impotence where Catherine was concerned must have had other reasons. Credit may be given the conjecture of Castéra, who believed that the Grand Duke only needed to overcome his shame and to confide in someone: "*Le moindre Rabin de Petersburg ou le moindre chirurgien l'aurait délivré de sa petite imperfection.*" The reference to the Rabbi leaves no doubt as to the nature of the "imperfection" referred to by Castéra. This explanation was in fact accepted as semi-official at a later date, for there was to be a day when some plausible story would have to be found to explain why the Grand Duke had remained childless for nine years and then suddenly became a father. It is not surprising, therefore, that the rumour of the "petite imperfection" appeared in numerous political despatches, for, after all, the ambassadors could only report what they heard at Court. But it is an unlikely story. In the course of the past few years Peter had suffered from in-

numerable illnesses, he had been examined time after time by various physicians, and if there had been the faintest suspicion of such an imperfection, the matter would doubtless have been investigated and confirmed. If this slight physical defect, which any surgeon could have remedied in a few minutes, had been all that stood in the way of Elizabeth's burning wish for an heir to the throne, it is quite certain that, instead of the confused and for the most part harmful measures which were adopted, Peter would have been given definite instructions, and would have had neither the opportunity nor even the desire to refuse to undergo an operation which on the one hand was a necessity of state and on the other a mere trifle. Peter's problem was far more complicated than this. The evidence is all against his having been either cold or having suffered from any physical defect; it points to psychological impotence, to the fact that he was, in modern terminology, a neurotic.

But "neurosis" is a word, a word with a cold scientific sound. Only the trained mind can deduce from it the inner conflict and suffering of a young man who in his utter loneliness was unable to reach out and make human contacts with his fellow creatures. Peter had grown up an orphan, in the unloving care of hated tutors, cut off from companions and playmates of his own age; he had known people who gave him orders and people who obeyed him, but never one with whom he could share that happy intimacy of common interests which is a preliminary to all forms of love. Catherine, who during her first month in Moscow had been able to comfort him with companionship—if only a childish companionship—had failed him at the moment of his greatest need. The very person who had awakened his stunned self-confidence, had wounded it most cruelly. He would never be able to forgive her for that. He would never ask for happiness from her, nor wish to make her happy; she could never be his wife and partner, but only his enemy. Her beauty, intelligence, and charm roused no passion in him, they did not make a man of him, they merely increased his sense of humiliation and inadequacy. As her beauty grew more radiant, he became more conscious of his



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own ugliness; her gay wit only served to put him more completely in the shade; he sought a refuge from her dangerous fascination in an easy intimacy with his servants. All this was happening to him subconsciously; even if he had had a friend he could not have confided these dark things to him. But neurosis has its own language, its own irrefutable logic: with a thousand words at his command, Peter could not have expressed his protest against all that was happening to him—against his marriage, his succession to the throne, against Elizabeth, against Catherine, against all the hated tasks which were set him and to which he felt himself unequal—so perfectly as by this persistent and “inexplicable” coldness in the marriage-bed.

It is ridiculous to speak of “guilt.” It would be as wrong to hold Peter responsible for his psychological malady as for some inherited physical disorder. Still, it was inevitable that his neglect should have its reaction on Catherine. She had entered into the marriage with very different feelings from his; her attitude had been an entirely positive one. True, she was not in love with him, but she had been fully determined to try to live as happily as possible with Peter and to fulfil all the expectations of the Empress, the Court, and the nation. “If he had wanted to win my love,” she wrote, “it would not have been difficult for him to do so.” And in spite of all that she did later, she must be given credit for these words. In the beginning she did everything in her power to win his love, and to try to love him, but he made it impossible for her. He scorned her and ran after other women. Without displaying the least jealousy—on the contrary, with a certain degree of pleasure—he suffered and encouraged her intimacies with other men. He subjected her to every insult a woman can endure, and what made the outrage a thousand times worse was that the whole Court, and in a certain sense even the whole of Europe, witnessed her humiliation. Every foreign ambassador knew that she could not excite her young husband’s attentions; every valet knew the name of the particular lady whom the Grand Duke happened to be pursuing. And since

no one understood the reason why Peter neglected his young and beautiful wife, a thousand busybodies, a thousand scandal-mongering tongues, a thousand idle brains set to work to discover secret failings, vices and perversions in Catherine, and to lay the blame on these. A year after their marriage, Peter and Catherine, instead of being united in a deep and tender intimacy by the birth of a child, were estranged by a thousand mutual mortifications, insults, and misunderstandings; a world of unspoken animosity lay between them.

To straighten out a marriage such as this, which was a miserable failure from the very start, was a superhuman task. Every injudicious word could only serve to increase the damage, any tactless interference by strangers could only make a bad matter worse, and render the existing harm irreparable. The most experienced adviser would not have dared to handle so delicate a situation save with the most subtle and tactful discretion, with velvet gloves, so to speak. Yet the problem of Peter and Catherine, which meant not merely patching up an unsuccessful marriage, but which involved the future of the throne, the dynasty, and the peace of Russia, was handled with unparalleled crudity and clumsiness. One asks in amazement why of all possible courses of action the most stupid was selected, and the answer is that here, as so often happens where politics are concerned, a variety of interests were involved, and between them produced a scheme which really satisfied no single one of them. Added to the chief consideration, which was the need of an heir to the throne, there was Bestushev's mistrust of Johanna Elizabeth's daughter, whom he suspected of conspiring secretly with the Prussian king, and also the growing dissatisfaction with regard to Peter's behaviour.

To meet all these difficulties—real and fancied—the Chancellor prepared two documents which he laid before the Empress for her signature on the tenth and eleventh of May. The first document, entitled *Instructions for a Noble Lady*, concerned Catherine. Instead of her governess, a lady of noble birth was

to be appointed as her constant companion, or chaperon. This noble lady was to make it her duty "constantly and as far as possible to superintend the marital intimacies between their Imperial Highnesses, and to impress upon the Grand Duchess that she had only been raised to Imperial rank in order that she might supply the empire with the desired heir and successor to the all-highest Imperial house." For this purpose it was necessary "to watch every step of the Grand Duchess, to accompany her on all occasions, in order to prevent any familiarity with the cavaliers, pages and servants of the Court." The worthy Timofei's warning had come too late; gossip concerning the Tchernishovs had reached Bestushev's ears and even those of Elizabeth. The noble lady's duties were further to consist in seeing that the Grand Duchess wrote no letters, and held no *tête-à-tête* or whispered conversations with anybody. This last injunction was the most important of all in Bestushev's eyes: he was particularly anxious that Catherine's correspondence and her conversations with foreign diplomats should be under strict surveillance.

The second document dealt with Peter. He also was to have a new companion in place of the worthless trio, Brümmer, Bergholz and Stehlin, whose duty would be to "restrain the Grand Duke's undesirable tendencies." Peter's undesirable tendencies were described in great detail in this document. It was stated that the Grand Duke "devoted the whole of his time to unwholesome intimacies with servants and lackeys, put them into uniform and drilled them, thus transforming the art of war into a joke." A further complaint was made that Peter poured wine over the heads of his servants at table, greeted people who came into his presence, even foreigners, with dubious jokes, was perpetually making grimaces, and could never keep his limbs still. And finally—it went on—it was quite inconceivable that an eighteen-year-old husband should play with dolls in his wife's bedroom. These accusations made by her "sworn enemy," Bestushev, not only correspond word for word with Catherine's own complaints against her husband (thereby confirming them), they put the finishing

touch to the clinical picture of this youthful neurotic. His grimaces, the twitching of his limbs, were obviously not bad manners, as Bestushev declared, but the involuntary paroxysms of a highly nervous subject.

Actually no more sensible suggestion could have been made than that of providing each of these inexperienced young people with a mature guardian. But unfortunately this was by no means the real purpose of the *Instructions*. Neither Bestushev nor Elizabeth realized that Peter and Catherine were not themselves responsible for the failure of their marriage. They made all kinds of false conjectures, suspected the pair of unwillingness, quarrelsomeness, unfaithfulness. This can clearly be seen by the wording of the Instruction regarding Catherine, and still more clearly in the choice of the "noble lady." Whereas Peter was given Prince Repnin, a man who was at any rate pleasant and of a kindly disposition, the appointment of Madame Tchoglokov as Catherine's chaperon showed that not sympathetic advice but strict surveillance was intended in her case. Madame Tchoglokov possessed none of the qualities calculated to be of assistance to an inexperienced young wife in so extraordinarily delicate a situation. She was neither wise nor kind; on the contrary, she had the reputation of being one of the most stupid and arrogant women at Court. But she was the tool of Bestushev, a reliable spy, and her virtue was beyond question. She had married her husband for love, and produced a child regularly each year, a fact which was meant to serve as an example to Catherine.

To Elizabeth's credit it must be said that she hesitated for two full weeks over this unfortunate appointment; perhaps her sound feminine instinct told her that this open supervision, of the very marriage-bed, was hardly likely to mend an unsuccessful marriage, and that to an unhappy wife the perpetual sight of a happy one was rather like rubbing salt into an open wound. Then she was informed by one of her many spies—Count Devier, later a hero of the Seven Years War—that he had surprised Catherine alone in her room with Tchernishov. In what circumstances he had surprised the two will never be

known with absolute certainty; the only evidence we have is Catherine's own account of the incident, and this very naturally emphasizes the fact that nothing took place but a completely harmless and frivolous conversation lasting only a few minutes. On the following day the whole Tchernishov family was banished from the Court, two of them were put through an examination (which however proved fruitless) and Madame Tchoglokov was initiated by the arch-enemy Bestushev into her duties as a duenna, her first task being to impart the unpleasant information that the Empress was very gravely displeased with Catherine. At this assault on the last wretched remnant of her freedom and happiness Catherine could no longer control her emotion. While her lips declared obedience to the wishes of Her Majesty, tears were streaming from her eyes. Madame Tchoglokov immediately ran back to report the lack of enthusiasm with which she had been received, and Catherine's eyes were still red with weeping when the Empress appeared in person. For the first time her accumulated wrath burst with the force of an elemental storm over the unfortunate girl's head. The Empress vowed that she knew the true reason for her tears; wives who did not love their husbands always wept. Yet no one had forced Catherine to marry the Grand Duke, it had been her own wish, and she had no right to weep over it now. "I know quite well that you alone are to blame if you have no children!" Elizabeth's face was scarlet and distorted with rage; in a moment she would have struck Catherine, as she was in the habit of striking the ladies, and sometimes even the gentlemen, of her household. Then with an effort the young wife recovered her presence of mind, she set aside her own anger, her outraged sense of justice, the reasonable excuses that were on the tip of her tongue, and said humbly: "Little Mother, I am in the wrong." She understood Elizabeth's Russian soul. The furious Empress, for the moment at any rate, was appeased.

The appointment of Madame Tchoglokov as her duenna made Catherine virtually a prisoner. Before, she had been

surrounded by secret informers, but now Elizabeth's eye could watch her every movement, and Bestushev's ear hear every word she spoke. The "noble lady" interpreted the instructions she had received as constituting the duties of a strict governess. Like all bad teachers she believed that the essence of education lay exclusively in prohibitions and punishments. It did not even remotely occur to her to try and win Catherine's confidence or, as an experienced wife and the mother of a large family, to discuss with the young Grand Duchess the delicate problem she had been called in to solve. It did not occur to her to encourage a happy companionship between the two unhappy creatures whom the disapproval of the Empress had rendered still more helpless and bewildered, or to create an atmosphere of warmth and confidence in which misunderstandings could be adjusted and insults forgotten. On the contrary, she contented herself with nagging and finding fault with everything she saw. She forbade the most harmless games, she forbade whatever was not expressly laid down. "*Pareil discours déplaira à sa Majesté*," she would say reprovingly if the conversation became at all animated—which was rarely enough. She had all the distrust of a stupid person for intelligence, of puffed-up virtue for any form of enjoyment. In a single year she managed to remove from the Grand Ducal household everyone who displeased her, that is to say, everyone whose character showed any trace of humour or tolerance—including Prince Repnin, who was replaced by Monsieur Tchoglov. This gentleman was hardly more intelligent than his wife, and equally arrogant, equally boring, equally subservient to Bestushev. The perpetual presence of these two guardians of virtue had the effect of making people avoid the "young Court" as much as possible. It was known that every word that was spoken there would be overheard and repeated to the Empress, often enough in a distorted form, either exaggerated, or misunderstood through sheer stupidity. The courtiers who surrounded the young couple were carefully selected, on the principle apparently that they should not be dangerous to the Grand Duchess. If, in spite of this, one or other of them managed

to quicken Catherine's lively and intelligent interest, or arouse her ever-ready laughter, he was certain to be dismissed and replaced by some reliable bore.

All this naturally threw the young couple into each other's company more uninterruptedly than ever before, but it did not succeed in producing an heir. Peter visited his wife several times a day. Sometimes he played to her on his violin—it was unfortunate that his only gift, his only enlightened interest, lay in music, which left Catherine completely cold. Sometimes he made her practise military drill for hours on end, and stand sentry with a gun on her shoulder in an empty room. Then he conceived the idea of building a pleasure-palace in the manner of a Carthusian monastery, where all the ladies and gentlemen were to walk about the park dressed as monks and nuns; Catherine had to make at least a hundred designs for this pleasure-monastery, and to pace the room with him endlessly discussing the nonsensical project in all its details. But at night, when he went to bed—during the first nine years of their marriage he never slept elsewhere than in Catherine's bed—when Madame Tchoglovov and the ladies-in-waiting had retired, he would ask Frau Kruse to bring his dolls and playthings. This was of course strictly forbidden, but Frau Kruse was attached to the Grand Duke because, like herself, he came from Holstein; moreover, she hated Madame Tchoglovov, having suffered from that lady's insolent arrogance, and she was delighted to outwit the hated duenna and do something to please Peter. She provided him with so many dolls that sometimes the whole bed was covered with them. As if this were fate's revenge for her early repudiation of her sex, Catherine, a radiant young woman of twenty, was forced every night of her life, sometimes until nearly two in the morning, to play the game she had detested as a little girl because she would so much rather have been a boy. The *Instructions* stated that "the Grand Duchess must in all things follow the wishes of her husband, and even in matters that appear to be wrong, she must submit rather than by obstinacy or opposition give cause for coldness and lack of harmony."

These words certainly did not refer to doll games and playing at soldiers—but then that was all Peter asked of his wife. It is amazing that she should have survived those nine years of nightly contempt without suffering a grave psychological injury, and that later she was able to refer to those painful and humiliating games with such refreshing and natural humour in the phrase: “Il me semble que j’étais bonne à autre chose!”

At first, however, the lonely, tedious days and the empty nights left their mark on her. She frequently had to call in her physician. Sometimes she had unbearable headaches, sometimes she suffered from sleeplessness, sometimes from loss of appetite. A mysterious hypochondria made her life a torment. Boerhave bled her from time to time, prescribed powders and medicines, and gave pretty Latin names to her various ailments. He dared not utter the real name of her disease—which was “Health.” Catherine was a healthy, full-blooded creature with the natural functional needs of her age. Her strong body craved exercise, her lively mind stimulation, her senses yearned for satisfaction, and her young heart for love.

But none of these things was given her. During the eight years when the Tchoglokovs dominated the young Court, the only chance she had of enjoying a little youthful happiness, a small measure of personal freedom, was in the few summer weeks she spent at Oranienbaum—a pleasure-palace Peter had received as a gift from the Empress. Here she could get up at three in the morning and go duck-shooting with only a servant to accompany her, or, seated astride her horse, gallop for hours over the meadows. She was forbidden to ride astride, since Elizabeth believed that this practice produced barrenness in women, but Catherine had invented a saddle with a movable pommel which made it possible for her to set off under the eyes of Madame Tchoglokov seated demurely side-saddle, and once she was out of sight, throw her leg over the horse’s back and, trusting to the devotion of her groom, ride as she pleased.

These lovely summer weeks passed all too quickly, and the young couple were not even allowed to go to Oranienbaum every year. The Russian winters seem to have no end. Even at the festivities and balls Catherine was continuously under observation; it was barely possible for a dancing partner to pay her a discreet compliment on her dress or her beautiful eyes. She drank in any praise as a dry sponge sucks up water; for a woman who is despised by her husband and knows that the most insignificant lady of the Court is preferred to herself becomes susceptible even to the clumsiest compliment and comforts her shattered self-confidence with the most insipid flattery. But Carnival-time only occupied a very short space of the year; for the remaining months the dull monotony of an idle, empty life flowed heavily by. For a long time there had been no human being to whom Catherine had dared speak frankly and openly. She had, moreover, to prevent herself from showing any particular preferences, for it had been brought home to her again and again that anyone to whom she took a fancy automatically fell into disgrace, and whosoever wished her well only brought trouble upon themselves. She believed she was without a single friend at Court when the last one was banished to Siberia merely on account of his friendship for her. This was her old servant, Timofei, her oracle, her ministering angel in a hundred predicaments. "That was my greatest grief throughout the whole of Elizabeth's reign." At last she was absolutely alone.

Out of boredom Catherine took to reading. Books shortened the interminable hours, distracted her thoughts from her own misfortunes, and peopled the empty desert of existence with all kinds of gay figures and events. Catherine read everything she could lay hands on—novels at first, particularly French ones. These romances excited an already too vivid imagination, and increased her longing for real experience, for human companionship, for love and the happiness of being loved. Still it was pleasanter to share the happiness of an imaginary heroine, to suffer with an imaginary hero, than to quarrel with Madame

Tchoglokov and play at dolls with Peter. For lack of any other occupation reading soon became Catherine's chief and most fervent hobby. She always kept a book in her room, and put a book in her pocket when she went out walking. "I was never without a book, never without sorrow, but always without happiness," she says, speaking of those years.

At first she read indiscriminately whatever her equally indiscriminating ladies-in-waiting happened to be reading. One day a book arrived at the Russian Court, a *History of Germany*, which had just appeared in France, and since no one seemed to be interested in this tedious volume, Catherine took possession of it. She found that she liked it better than the sentimental trashy novels she had been reading, and made the delightful discovery that books could serve not only to amuse but also to instruct. At last she remembered Gyllenborg's advice, and sent for the works of Plutarch and Tacitus. Her mind, which was so much concerned with realities, found history—an account of real events—far more exciting than the most delightful of invented stories. Since the mainspring of her character was ambition, she preferred to identify herself with an Alexander or an Alcibiades rather than with a languishing, love-sick Chloe. No sooner had she begun her self-education than she realized how little she really knew. She had, after all, only received the rough education of an ordinary little princess. Baron Mardefeld—whom Frederick, to Elizabeth's intense annoyance, had not yet recalled—one day recommended to her Henry Bayle's *Dictionnaire philosophique et critique*. It was really a reference book, a kind of critical dictionary, but Catherine, in her wild thirst for knowledge, read it from the first line to the last. It took her two years to finish it, but they were by no means wasted years. The foundations of an all-round knowledge were laid, and the seeds of independent thought, as well as doubt concerning ready-made opinions, planted in Catherine's mind. Bayle, the greatest philosophical heretic of the seventeenth century, was the direct forerunner of the Age of Reason and the Encyclopædists—it was only a step from him to Montesquieu and Voltaire. Very soon

*L'esprit des lois* became the constant companion of the lonely Grand Duchess. She felt the hot unrest of the age in which she was living, her heart was inflamed by the burning problems which three decades later were to set a portion of Europe on fire. She had often been told of the great men who had made history, now for the first time she learned of the innumerable humble creatures about whom history is silent, whose numbers give power to the mighty, but who themselves are robbed of power, the downtrodden and the exploited—the *People*. It was an important, almost a sacred discovery, and it meant more to Catherine than the first experience of love to a hundred other women. The time had come for her to remember the thin, grimy faces that had stared into the royal carriage on the pilgrimage to Kiev, and the wretched mud houses that had clustered behind the Empress's splendid palaces. It no longer seemed to her a natural dispensation of Heaven that these people should starve while a group of aristocratic idlers assembled round the throne and revelled in the enjoyment of their privileges. Even the throne itself was no longer sacred; Catherine's newly awakened conscience felt that its prestige must be upheld not by the force of bayonets but by its power to safeguard the rights of even the humblest and most unimportant of its subjects. Though she was so close to the throne herself, she was at this time far more conscious of the tyranny it wielded than of its splendour, and this may partly account for her fervent espousal of the doctrine of "the rights of man," and also for the fact that she reacted to this new belief not by repudiating her position as a prospective ruler, but by immediate and vigorous partisanship of the downtrodden. The fact that she was personally experiencing the cruelty and injustice which tyranny can inflict made her the "enthusiastic republican" she always avowed herself to be, even later, when she became Empress.

Soon the works of Voltaire began to take their place beside those of Montesquieu on her bookshelves, and in addition to doubts concerning the divine right of absolutism, Catherine began to doubt the existence of God Himself. So far, she had

faithfully obeyed the doctrines first of the Lutheran and later of the Greek Church without bothering her head very much about them. Now she discovered that the Church was not only a mediator between man and heaven, but also a great worldly power, as important and often more important than the throne itself; she learned that the spiritual needs of mankind were the means of bringing earthly rewards and possessions to the Church, and that the throne exploited the influence of the Church and the Church in turn made use of the power of the throne.

While Madame Tchoglovov stood guard outside Catherine's door like an angry Cerberus to see that no unauthorized or suspect person, or even daily news of what was happening at the Court, should reach the Grand Duchess, the bold, revolutionary spirit of the eighteenth century was forcing its way into the prisoner's apartments under the covers of those inconspicuous grey-bound volumes. While Catherine was forbidden to indulge in harmless games with her young ladies-in-waiting, she was learning to laugh the great liberating laughter of Voltaire, the laughter of wisdom at folly, the profoundest but most dangerous form of mirth—the laughter of philosophers. While Elizabeth, who saw her growing more beautiful each day and each year becoming a more formidable rival, submitted her to endless humiliations, Catherine, without complaining or attempting to assert herself, was quietly and steadily outgrowing the Empress, outgrowing her environment, outgrowing the others at that dismally uncultured Court, of whom half could not read and scarcely a third could write. In Paris the dull-witted Dauphin and his frivolous wife, Marie Antoinette, were unconscious of the stormy wind that heralded the earthquake of the revolution, but in Russia, far from the scene of the impending disaster, in the midst of drunken, gambling semi-barbarians, the young Grand Duchess—and she alone—felt the promise of a new age to come. It did not alarm her; she welcomed it. Cut off from the world, she alone discovered and was inspired by the fundamental thought of the age. Her solitude was invaded by the best minds of the day; deprived of the power to act in-

dependently, she learned to think independently; reduced to the status of a prisoner, she acquired real greatness. Her ambition was no longer merely to become a ruler, an arbitrator of power, it aspired to the noble, the truly royal aim of establishing Good as a supreme ruling power.

Her misfortunes invariably turned out to her advantage. If during these critical years of her development she had been allowed to live the gay, unrestricted life of an attractive young woman, if she had been permitted to indulge in all the pleasures that youth, beauty, and her high position offered, she would never have had time or the wish to develop her natural mental gifts, and attain that degree of culture which was to raise her high above the level of any other feminine ruler. The Tchoglokovs were a blessed scourge sent by Providence, but this was the only sense in which they fulfilled their mission. They had been appointed so that they might enforce Bestushev's *Instructions*; but they neglected to carry them out in every particular.

They even failed to fulfil Elizabeth's initial demand, that of providing the Grand Ducal couple with a shining example of marital happiness and virtue. It would be an amusing subject for a comedy—the exemplary married couple who, by perpetually watching over another married couple, themselves became involved in a series of entanglements, to the glee of the young and the fury of the old Court. The trouble began in this way: among his other duties Monsieur Tchoglokov was obliged to sleep in a room adjoining that of the Grand Duke, so that Madame Tchoglokov felt lonely at nights and asked one of the ladies-in-waiting, a Mademoiselle Kocheliev, to sleep with her. When Monsieur Tchoglokov returned home in the mornings he saw in the bed beside his sour, perpetually pregnant wife a comely young creature with a dazzling white skin—and even professional guardians of morality are not entirely unsusceptible to such charms. Then one day Catherine contracted measles and Madame Tchoglokov stationed herself at the sick bed and never left it. What else could she do? She

had to make sure that no doctor brought the Grand Duchess a forbidden message, that no lady-in-waiting, no chambermaid surreptitiously handed her a note. She was so taken up with watching Catherine that the possibility of danger in her own home never occurred to her. She was still blissfully ignorant that anything was wrong when the whole of the young Court was already giggling over Monsieur Tchoglokov's fall. She was the only one who failed to notice that Mademoiselle Kocheliev was growing stouter every day, and in the midst of an indescribable scandal that eventually reached the ears of Elizabeth she alone had no notion of what was going on. For a few days it seemed as if the Grand Duke and Duchess were to be delivered from their tormentors—but then Madame Tchoglokov forgave her husband for the sake of their seven children, and even went so far as to throw herself at the Empress's feet and beg mercy for her erring spouse. Backed by the support of Bestushev, the Tchoglokovs retained their posts—but there was no more talk of an "exemplary marriage." The wife had forgiven her husband for purely practical reasons, his deception had left her with an unconquerable repugnance for him. This private grief did not make her more indulgent or more amiable, it merely increased her natural touchiness, her bad temper, her perpetual irritability. Frau Kruse triumphed too soon over the fall of her rival; Madame Tchoglokov heard of it and the indiscretion cost the good-natured provider of dolls her post. She was replaced by Madame Vladyslava, and this for once turned out to be a good exchange for Catherine.

During his eight years of service Monsieur Tchoglokov failed completely as a tutor. His heart was not entirely in his job, for while he wished to obey Elizabeth he was also anxious to ingratiate himself as far as possible with his future Emperor—so that, whenever he could, he affected blindness. This state of affairs was greatly to Peter's disadvantage, for his absurd military games and his idolatrous worship of Holstein and the Prussian king made him, as he grew older, increasingly ludicrous and unpopular. When he was twenty-four, the

Grand Duke turned his room into a miniature arsenal. Battalions of tin and lead soldiers were set out on long narrow tables, together with fortresses made of cardboard, and wooden cannons. While Catherine was busy studying the Encyclopædists, Peter kept a pack of hounds which he drove from one corner of his room to the other with a riding whip until the animals collapsed yelping with pain. One day a rat climbed on to the table, gnawed a fortress and devoured two cardboard soldiers. Catherine happened to come in just as Peter was punishing the rodent for "high treason." He allowed one of his hounds to catch it and then hung it up in the middle of the room as "a public warning." On another occasion some visitors from Holstein brought him a cardboard model of the town of Kiel, and Peter declared quite openly that this town was "dearer to him than the whole of Russia."

In other ways, too, Peter remained his old self under Tchoglov's guardianship. He never ceased to pursue first one, then another of the ladies of the Court, and he never forgot to inform Catherine of his new infatuations. There are certain things to which a wife can never accustom herself. Although Catherine did not love her husband, she was wounded to the quick every time Peter displayed his preference for another woman openly before the whole Court. She was particularly insulted by his infatuation for the hunchback Princess Courland, to whom he paid such marked attention that on one occasion Catherine left the table on the pretext of a sudden indisposition. She had hardly gone to bed and fallen asleep when Peter appeared and awoke her in order to give her a detailed account of his "love." Catherine, weary of these tactless explanations and hoping to bring them to a speedy conclusion, pretended to fall asleep—but this strange husband forced her attention by a series of hefty blows. It was true he had drunk a good deal that evening, and on other evenings, too, he often drank more than was good for him, once even when he was at the Empress's table. Sometimes he got drunk with his servants and in their cups the men easily forgot to pay Peter the respect due to him as their lord and master.

When this happened he would attempt to restore his prestige by beating them and uttering all manner of threats—often with little enough success. When the great fire broke out in the Moscow palace every effort was made to carry the Grand Duke's furniture to safety; during transport the sliding doors of an old cupboard gave way and, to the astonishment of the bearers, and the equal astonishment of the "watchdog" Tchoglokov, the immense piece of furniture proved to be stuffed with brandy bottles. This then was the result of Tchoglokov's training: new vices had been added to Peter's "undesirable tendencies"—those of drunkenness and violence.

Madame Tchoglokov had no better results to show than her husband. In the matter which Bestushev considered most important, namely, Catherine's correspondence, her seclusion from the outside world had failed to achieve its purpose. According to Clause 4 of the *Instructions*, "to avoid the suspicion of unnecessary and secret correspondence," Catherine was strictly forbidden to write letters of any kind whatsoever. Her monthly letters to her parents were drafted by the Foreign Office and she was merely allowed to put her signature to the stereotyped phrase: "I am well and hope that you are the same." The relations between Prussia and Russia were becoming more strained every year. Frederick's diplomats at the Russian Court were by no means inactive, but they were unsuccessful in concealing their activities, and only fed the growing mistrust to which even Lestocke, Elizabeth's most trusted friend, was one day to fall a victim. He was suspected of receiving money from Frederick, was thrown into prison, tortured and, although not the slightest incriminating evidence could be brought to light, was deprived of all his possessions and banished to Uglitch in Siberia. With her profound insight into the nature of despotism, Catherine wrote concerning this incident: "The Empress was not strong enough to give an innocent man his due: she feared his resentment." Following De la Chétardie's banishment, this was the second sacrifice to Bestushev's policy Elizabeth made from the circle of her intimate friends.

Catherine had no particular love for Frederick II. In spite of all the unhappiness she had endured in Russia, she was devoted heart and soul to her new country, and, though she was his "sworn enemy," she shared Bestushev's political views far more than those of her husband. If she entered into a secret correspondence with her mother, it was not for political reasons, but because she rebelled against the humiliating supervision to which she was subjected and because the opportunity for an act of rebellion presented itself in a form that appealed to her romantic, danger-loving nature.

One day a Knight of Malta, the Chevalier de Sacromoso, came to Petersburg. He was received with high honours and was also presented at Court. When he kissed the Grand Duchess's hand he slipped a little roll of paper into it. Catherine contrived to read the dangerous document without being seen. It was a letter from her mother, asking for all kinds of detailed information, among other things whether Courland could not be obtained for Catherine's brother. In addition there were a few lines in Sacromoso's writing, requesting her to slip her reply into the pocket of a certain musician during the next concert. At first this seemed an impossible demand, for like a real prisoner Catherine had none of the materials necessary for writing, no paper, no ink, no pen. She could not possibly ask for these things without arousing the suspicions of Madame Tchoglovkov. What was she to do? She ordered her jeweller to bring her some silver and gold trinkets, on the pretext of selecting gifts for members of her household. She bought a number of small objects, among them a so-called "everlasting pen" in which an ink-container was inserted. Paper was very much easier to come by: most books have a blank fly-leaf, and since she possessed so many books, she soon had one of these blank pages at her disposal. Then she wrote her letter—a harmless enough letter—and at the next concert which was given in the Grand Duke's apartments, she strolled carelessly up to the little orchestra and waited until the musician in question, pretending to look for a handkerchief, opened the flap of his coat-pocket. Outwardly calm, but with a

beating heart, she dropped the letter into his pocket. No one saw her.

In this way a number of letters were exchanged between Zerbst and Petersburg. But Catherine also carried on other and far more dangerous forms of secret letter-writing. One day a Finnish maidservant handed her a long letter from Andrei Tchernishov, who had been in prison ever since the old scandal of two years before. Catherine managed to answer this also. It is hardly poetic, but characteristic of her situation, that she was only able to do so whilst sitting on her night-commode. Many people conclude from this secret correspondence that her relations with Tchernishov had really been intimate—but there is no reason to believe this. The Catherine who immediately upon her accession to the throne remembered her old servant Timofei and provided him with a good position and a warm fur cloak can easily be credited with wishing to send a few words of comfort and a little money to the innocent and unjustly condemned Tchernishov with no other motive in her mind than a sheer love of justice.

For the present Catherine's virtue was still intact. This was no thanks to Madame Tchoglov; any lover who was as clever and determined as he was handsome would have been able to subdue the dragon—as was soon to be proved. Yet Rasumovsky, the brother of the Empress's favourite, who throughout a whole summer used to ride twenty versts every day in order to get a glimpse of Catherine, did not venture to declare his love until twenty years later; it was another cavalier who conceived the mad idea of coming to Catherine's room by night, disguised as a servant. The one man who could most easily and conveniently have arranged an assignation with her, Catherine's most persistent, dogged and infatuated admirer, was none other than Monsieur Tchoglov, who was abhorrent to her. After his unlucky venture with Mademoiselle Kocheliev he had fallen in love with the Grand Duchess, and his passion was an open secret at Court. If the ridiculous measures for safeguarding the Grand Duchess did not find a deserving and farcical end in the deflowerment of innocence

by its own guardian, Elizabeth had no cause to be grateful to the stupid duenna—she owed her thanks entirely to the fat belly of Monsieur Tchoglokov.

Six years after she took up her duties Madame Tchoglokov was forced to admit to the furious Empress that the Grand Ducal marriage had not yet been consummated, and that Catherine was still a virgin. The ominous *Instructions* had not fulfilled their purpose. They had robbed Catherine of six years of her youth, they had turned her into a kind of political prisoner, a cautious diplomatist, a fanatical bookworm, a philosopher, a revolutionary—but they had not made her a mother.

## CHAPTER VI

### A CHILD, TWO MOTHERS AND NO FATHER

SERGEI SALTYKOV, a dashing youth of an old and aristocratic Russian family, married for love an attractive young lady of the Court in 1750. Although she loved him madly, he tired of her after a few years and sought new adventures of which he was able to find as many as he wanted. He was young, handsome as the day, sufficiently witty, and in addition possessed that quality which is the most difficult of all for women to withstand: though he was completely faithless he took his love-making extremely seriously. When he desired a woman, he was totally obsessed by his passion for her, and devoted all his time and energies to winning her; the determination of a Field Marshal, the cunning of a diplomat, the valour of a Cossack, the endurance of an explorer became his; he moved heaven and earth, called upon God and the devil; difficulties only served to redouble his determination, opposition trebled his passion—in short, he was the perfect seducer.

A man such as this has no use for easy conquests. When Saltykov returned to the Court in 1752, Elizabeth had begun to tire of her favourite Rasumovsky, and the star of Ivan Shuvalov was in the ascendant. The Empress gave Saltykov a plain hint that he would not have much trouble in ousting Shuvalov, but the handsome Sergei did his best to ignore these hints; he was not the man to come when he was called. Moreover, Elizabeth was forty-seven.

The Grand Duchess Catherine was twenty-three, and at the height of her beauty. Sergei knew, as did everyone else, that she was watched day and night, that it was forbidden even to whisper to her. He knew that any attempt to approach the Grand Duchess was fraught with dangers, and that banishment

to Siberia was the least of these dangers. In the whole length and breadth of Russia there was no woman with whom there was less chance of having an affair, and to have an affair with whom entailed a greater risk. This very fact lent charm to the situation for Saltykov; it was for this reason he fell in love with Catherine.

He visited the young Court as often as possible, but not alone, for that would have attracted attention. He was always accompanied by his equally aristocratic friend, Leo Narychkin, a wag and a wit of the first order, an intelligent and amiable young man whom everybody liked and nobody took seriously. Saltykov sought the friendship of the Grand Duke quite openly. It was not hard to win; Peter had a special penchant for handsome young men, he was weak and susceptible, and very soon fell so completely under the spell of Saltykov that he could not bear to be without his new friend for a single day—greatly to the joy of his Imperial aunt, who preferred to see him in the company of two Russians rather than that of his Holstein officers.

Saltykov and Narychkin never failed to pay their daily court to Madame Tchoglokov. She was once again far advanced in pregnancy and in consequence confined to her room, and Catherine had, naturally, to be continually in her company.

Madame Tchoglokov was flattered by the attentions of two such brilliant young men, and these young men for their part never betrayed by the slightest sign that their visits were not entirely on her account. So much affable courtesy actually softened her sharpness, and lifted her gloom; she took no offence at Leo Narychkin's mad pranks, she allowed the young men to laugh as much as they liked and even joined in the merriment herself.

In the evenings there were gatherings in the Grand Duke's apartments. Here it was the eye of Monsieur Tchoglokov which kept a strict watch and was indeed doubly vigilant, since the watcher was himself in love. On these occasions Saltykov's genius was first able to display itself. He discovered that Tchoglokov was, of all things, a poet, and persuaded him

to compose a long poem every evening on a given theme; his verses were enthusiastically applauded by the whole company (who quickly entered into the spirit of the game) and Narychkin set them to music. This unaccustomed flattery turned the simple man's head; no sooner was one poem completed, than he was persuaded to start on another, and while he brooded over his rhymes, while Peter paid court to Mademoiselle Shafirov, his newest flame, while Narychkin strummed busily on the clavicord, Saltykov was able to tell Catherine just why he went out riding with the Grand Duke, why he paid such regular visits to Madame Tchoglokov, and why he hailed Monsieur Tchoglokov as a poet. Although there were half a dozen people present he was able, without being overheard by any of them, to speak of his love at last. He spoke in whispers, but they were fiery whispers, and he renewed his declarations every day.

Catherine swore that she did all she could to repulse him, that she met his persistent wooing with an equally persistent refusal. This may well be true; she knew the risks of the game, for herself as well as Saltykov. Nevertheless, her refusal was of the mind, and not of the heart. The man who whispered such passionate words in her ear every evening was handsome, he loved her and was risking his very life for his love. She had only to turn her head to see her ugly, pock-marked husband, who was insulting her openly by his attentions to Mademoiselle Shafirov, as he had insulted her unceasingly during the eight years of their married life by his passions for other women. It was impossible not to return Saltykov's love. Her lips might murmur all manner of wise reproofs—remind him of his wife, of her own position—but on the lips of a woman in love every "no" has the inflexion of a "yes." And Saltykov knew the language of love. He took none of her objections seriously.

One day Tchoglokov invited the whole party to a hunting expedition on one of the Neva islands. While the others were urging their horses after the hare, Saltykov managed to stay behind among the tall reeds with Catherine. For the first time he was alone with her. For the first time he was able to

speaking of his love without lowering his voice, without wearing a mask to disarm suspicious eyes. It was impossible for Catherine to hide her true feelings. Only a saint could have withstood him, and she was no saint—she was a normal, healthy young woman, who for eight years had been unutterably lonely.

The Grand Duke was by no means as stupid as Tchoglokov. With his perverse sexual curiosity he soon discovered that something was afoot, and a few days after the hunting expedition he said to Mademoiselle Shafirov: "Sergei Saltykov and my wife are deceiving Tchoglokov. They make him believe anything they want, and laugh behind his back." This attitude was characteristic: it was not he, the husband, who was being tricked, but the watchful Tchoglokov, who was himself head over ears in love with Catherine. Peter was not angry; here was a topic for scandalous gossip. Just as he always betrayed his various loves to Catherine, he betrayed Catherine to Mademoiselle Shafirov. The Shafirov lost no time in repeating what he said, and soon it reached the ears of the Empress, and the wretched Madame Tchoglokov was told that her husband was a booby who was letting a couple of impudent brats lead him by the nose. The danger for the moment was too great, Saltykov and Narychkin retired to their estates for several months, the summer and autumn passed in longing and boredom. It was not until the winter when the Court moved to Moscow, that Saltykov dared to return from his voluntary banishment.

The moment he saw Catherine he knew how sorely he had been missed. His passionate love was equally passionately returned. But how was this mutual passion to be satisfied? In Moscow Catherine was far less free than she had been in the summer palace. There were no hunting parties here, no opportunities for private conversation. It was then that Saltykov had a brilliant idea—an idea which solved more than the immediate problem of intimate meetings, which solved the burning problem of the throne, and completely changed Catherine's position.

The idea was to bring about a reconciliation with Bestushev. Saltykov had quite rightly guessed that it was not the Tchoglokovs, not Elizabeth, not Peter who were Catherine's real gaolers—but purely and simply Bestushev. Catherine, too, knew this and was ready to extend her hand to the enemy without more ado. Her passion for Saltykov may have had a good deal to do with this, but her readiness for a reconciliation was also consistent with her character. Bestushev had antagonized her from the first moment she set foot in Russia, she had him to thank for countless humiliations, yet in spite of this she did not hesitate to seize the first opportunity of making a friend of the "sworn enemy." She sent a certain Bremse to the Chancellor with a message saying that her feelings toward him were no longer so cold as hitherto.

The reconciliation came at a very convenient moment for Bestushev. For various reasons his position had become far less secure than it had been. This was mainly the work of the new favourite, Shuvalov. Shuvalov was not egoistical and indolent as Rasumovsky had been; he had secured influential positions for his brother and his cousins. The Shuvalovs were a new political power in Russia, they threatened to become too strong for the old Chancellor. Elizabeth's health, too, was beginning to suffer from her irregular habits. She had frequent attacks of colic, which were followed by fits of severe depression, and were in all probability really epileptic seizures. She might die any day, and then Peter would be Czar—that childish fool, who worshipped Frederick II and was prepared to sacrifice Holy Russia for Holstein! In spite of his dislike of her, Bestushev had long since realized that Catherine was far cleverer than her husband, and that she was as sympathetic to the interests of Russia as Peter was indifferent. To have Catherine as an ally would be something for the moment, and in the future it might mean everything.

Bestushev welcomed Catherine's messenger with open arms. He sent word that he was entirely at the service of the Grand Duchess, that she had only to point the way and everything could be discussed between them. The next day Saltykov waited

on the Chancellor. The conversation between the two men was perfectly frank. Catherine's immediate requests were of an entirely unpolitical nature: "She shall see that I am by no means the werewolf she takes me to be," said Bestushev. "I will make Vladyslava as gentle as a lamb."

But why should personal considerations not go hand in hand with political needs? A few days later the Tchoglokov said to Catherine: "I want to talk to you very seriously." She proceeded to read her a long but only superficially obscure lecture. She spoke, among other things, of marital faithfulness, of the sacred laws of religion and morality, of honour and virtue. "But," she added, "there are cases of higher importance, which make an exception to the rule necessary." She then spoke of love for the fatherland, which should be greater even than love for one's husband, and, finally, she blurted out: "You have the choice of Narychkin or Saltykov. If I am not mistaken, you prefer the former?" Catherine had listened in silence, wondering whether all this was a straightforward proposal or a trap. But at this point she exclaimed: "No, no!" "Well, then," replied Madame Tchoglokov, "it is the other. You will see that I shall put no difficulties in your way."

She kept her word, for she had received fresh instructions. Bestushev had been at work, and had contrived to combine the interests both of Catherine and Elizabeth in a very pertinent manner. The bolts of the prison door flew open. Under the protection of the all-powerful Chancellor, sanctioned by the Empress, guided by Madame Tchoglokov, under the very eyes of Vladyslava, Saltykov at last entered Catherine's apartments.

Up to this point everything was clear. But what was Peter's part in the affair?

Catherine declares that while Madame Tchoglokov was making efforts on her behalf Monsieur Tchoglokov had busied himself with the Grand Duke and had arranged several meetings for him with a pretty young widow named Grooth. But quite a different story—and one, obviously, which was being

circulated at Court—was told by young Champeaux to his father, the French ambassador in Hamburg. Saltykov, so the rumour ran, had taken advantage of a drunken bout to extract a promise from the Grand Duke that he would submit to a necessary minor operation, and hardly had Peter given this promise than Boerhave appeared with a fully prepared surgeon and Peter was taken at his word. In consideration of this service Saltykov was said to have received a magnificent diamond from the Empress.

It is impossible to ascertain which of these two stories, if either, is the true one. But even if both were invented, they prove that Peter was not in the plot, that his interests were not sacrificed ruthlessly to those of the state, that everything possible was done to make a man of him at last, so that in the event of Catherine's pregnancy he might be accepted as the father of her child. Were these attempts successful? In view of Peter's indifference to Catherine and his cynical outlook it is quite possible that he connived negatively at the intrigue, and allowed all these things, which did not concern him greatly, to happen without comment. Even if he did make overtures to Catherine, it was too late, after eight years' estrangement. One thing, however, is certain: Catherine's affair with Saltykov lasted for two more years, and Peter continued to pay court to Mademoiselle Shafirov and various other ladies. If the widow Grooth or any other woman succeeded in making a man of the twenty-four-year-old Grand Duke, no power in the world could, after so many mutual humiliations, have made a real union of his marriage with Catherine!

Twice the hopes of an heir to the throne were frustrated by incomprehensible carelessness: Catherine had two miscarriages, the first as the result of a too hurried journey, the second after a hunting expedition to Lubertzy, where she had to spend the night shivering in a rain-soaked tent. What was Madame Tchoglokov doing, who had borne seven children herself and should, with her experience, have been able to make herself useful for once?

The good lady had completely lost her head in the general

abandonment of morality. She, the most virtuous of women, was consumed by a belated but all the more uncontrollable passion for Prince Repnin, and found every possible excuse for neglecting her duty. Catherine was no longer her prisoner, but her confidante, the only person on whose inviolable discretion she could rely. Her husband, meanwhile, had never ceased to pine for the Grand Duchess. The foolish man allowed Saltykov to persuade him that he was pleading his cause and that this was the reason why he spent hours closetted with the Grand Duchess. Once again it was the Grand Duke who saw through the fraud and exposed it, not from motives of jealousy but simply to prove to Tchoglokov "who was his true friend"—that is to say, out of jealous venom toward Catherine. But Saltykov, "the prince of intrigue," immediately conceived a new idea: he persuaded Tchoglokov that the Empress herself was casting tender glances at him. Tchoglokov believed in his luck as readily as he had believed in his prowess as a poet; he went as often as possible to the old Court, danced attendance on Elizabeth at masked balls and was, in fact, received with extreme graciousness. But the practical jokers had forgotten to take into account the watchful jealousy of the Shuvalovs, who trembled for their newly acquired power, and succeeded in prejudicing the Empress against the wretched Tchoglokov to such an extent that she called him "a blockhead and a traitor" openly at table. The poor man took this so much to heart that he fell ill with jaundice. When he was in bed, a doctor who was completely under the influence of the Shuvalovs attended him, and Catherine suggested that he had been called in to kill Tchoglokov; "at all events, the physicians who attended him at the last declared that he had been treated like a man whom one desires to kill." On his deathbed he had several violent scenes with his wife, for he had heard of her adulterous relationship and taxed her with it. She was anything but repentant. She said that she had loved him only too much when she was young, and that she had suffered intolerably when he became unfaithful to her. Catherine was a witness of this scene, which Monsieur Tchoglokov survived only a

few days. There was a sinister and grotesque consistency in the tragic end of this "model marriage." Four days after the death of her husband Madame Tchoglokov was dismissed from her position. Catherine was pregnant for the third time. Madame Tchoglokov was bitterly disappointed, for she believed (not entirely without justification) that she had performed a great service to the nation and the dynasty. The Shuvalovs, however, considered that she had done nothing but afford Catherine opportunities for frivolity. And the Empress abided by the opinion of the Shuvalovs; she was either clever enough to conceal the truth from her favourites, or determined enough to conceal it from herself.

The relationship between Elizabeth and Catherine grew more strained from year to year, yet it was always a positive relationship between two women of unusual character and temperament, a tense interplay of emotions that were anything but simple. Ten years before, Elizabeth had taken the little Princess of Zerbst to her heart with a wild maternal love, and Catherine had loved and worshipped the beautiful, stately Empress as her ideal of womanhood. Everything had changed since then; the ageing Elizabeth had begun to see a rival in Catherine, and Catherine, as she grew older, discovered the less pleasing side of her idol. In spite of the deference with which the younger woman invariably treated her, Elizabeth recognized and feared the greater mind, the firmer will, the stronger personality of Catherine, and Catherine had been made to realize a thousand times that the great Empress was often no more than a vain, capricious and despotic lunatic. Ugly hostile feelings had grown up beside the first warm mutual attraction, had darkened it, sometimes turned it to hatred—but had never completely destroyed it. On rare occasions, and they were always genuine, Elizabeth's affection for the young woman burst through like the sun emerging from behind thick, black storm-clouds. At such times the tears would pour down her cheeks because Catherine was to have a tooth extracted, or she would comfort her because Peter had scolded her unjustly, or solicitously stick a few

beauty-patches on her unrouged cheeks. And Catherine, whose *Memoirs* are one long complaint of Elizabeth's senseless injustice, again and again forgets herself in enthusiastic, almost lover-like descriptions of Elizabeth's beauty, her faultless carriage on horseback, her inimitable grace as a dancer. In 1750 the good Christian August, Catherine's father, died. A week after the news reached Russia, Elizabeth sent Madame Tchoglovkov to Catherine to command her to cease weeping "for, after all, her father was not a king." This was a deep and unforgettable injury, yet Catherine, describing a masked ball which took place two years later and at which Elizabeth, as usual, danced in man's clothes, wrote: "One could have wished to be able to look at the Empress perpetually, and it was with regret that one turned one's gaze away from her, for nothing could surpass her." In her enthusiasm she said to Elizabeth: "It is fortunate that Your Majesty is not really a man, for otherwise we women would all lose our heads." And Elizabeth replied that, if she were indeed a man, she would choose Catherine and no other for her lover. These tender exchanges, which ended with a warm kiss, were possible in spite of Elizabeth's frequent anger with Catherine, and in spite of all the torments she inflicted on her. Many and far more vital misunderstandings were finally to alienate these two women, who had a fundamental natural attraction for each other.

When Catherine had come to Russia ten years before to marry Peter, Elizabeth had visualized a strange idyll. She, who had denied herself marriage in order to preserve her independence, who was childless and lived merely to indulge her caprices and her passions, knew a perpetual and unappeased longing for the other kind of life, which could never be hers—for the conventional home. A happily married couple always won her approval, and she loved children above all things. She knew, too, that the state is founded on the family, and that an example of model domesticity in the royal household pleases the nation and consolidates the throne. It had been her dream that the young Grand Ducal couple, at her side and under her protection, should provide this pattern of model

domesticity, bring numerous children into the world, and thus cause her own sins to be overlooked, while satisfying her maternal longings and the requirements of the dynasty at one and the same time. But that dream had not come true.

Now at last, after ten years of waiting, disappointment, impatience, anger, and despair (Elizabeth had once even played with the idea of freeing the prisoner Ivan, whom she feared so greatly, and officially nominating him her successor), now at last Catherine was approaching her confinement. But how vastly different from Elizabeth's sentimental and respectable dreams was the realization! Who was the father of the expected child? Elizabeth preferred not to inquire too closely into the question. Although she had known of Bestushev's plan, and for reasons of state had approved it, it still shocked both her religious instincts and her Romanoff family pride. In any case two years had elapsed since the inception of the plan; dared she hope that in those two years Peter had become a man, a real husband? She was quite free to hope, for the Grand Duke was either blind, or wise, or cynical enough to remain silent. But there was no lack of comment at Court on this belated fruitfulness of a palpably unsuccessful marriage, and the Shuvalovs saw to it that all these rumours reached the ears of the Empress. She was torn by the most diverse emotions, and her actions were correspondingly full of contradictions. On one occasion, when the Grand Duke was absent, she appeared suddenly in Catherine's private apartments, with the obvious intention of surprising her with Saltykov, and it was only by a lucky chance that this did not occur. On the other hand she made no attempt to separate the two. On the annual journey from Moscow to Petersburg Catherine spent most of the time in tears: she feared that Saltykov had been left behind in Moscow, for which, indeed, there was sufficient cause. But her tears were unnecessary, she was even permitted to see her lover at one of the stations on the road, obviously to prevent her from falling into a fit of despair, which might have been dangerous in her advanced state of pregnancy.

On the twentieth of September, in the middle of the night, Catherine felt the first pangs of labour. Elizabeth was informed at the same time as the midwife. She hurried to the sickroom at two o'clock in the morning and for twelve hours did not move from Catherine's side. Catherine herself, when her pains began, had been placed on a low mattress beside the bed, according to the custom of the times. No sooner was the longed-for boy born than Elizabeth ordered the midwife to carry him into her own apartments. The Grand Duke, who for convention's sake had cast a look at the infant, followed her together with the ladies of the Court. The mother was left alone.

The Imperial flags were hoisted on the palace roof, from every fortress cannons announced the happy birth of a royal heir. Catherine lay lonely and forgotten on her mattress between two draughty windows. While the bells were ringing in all the churches, and thousands of the faithful were on their knees praying for their future Emperor—"Qui est-ce qui aurait cru alors, en se jouissant de la naissance de Paul, que c'est un tiran qui naissait pour la Russie?"—while the whole town was in a state of joyous uproar, and the Grand Duke was emptying glass after glass to the health of his "son"—Catherine lay bathed in sweat, tortured by thirst, a useless piece of flesh that had fulfilled its task, and not even Vladyslava dared hand her a glass of water without the permission of the midwife. The midwife was with the Empress, who, beside herself with joy, and completely absorbed in the child, had entirely forgotten the mother.

She had taken possession of the child and she refused to give it up. Duties of state were neglected, her favourites and all other passions forgotten in this new and long-desired happiness—caressing a child, pressing it to her bosom, nursing it, spoiling it. The baby was put to sleep in her own room, when he cried she ran to him, unwrapped him when it was necessary, and tucked him up so carefully that he was nearly suffocated under a mass of down-quilts and furs. Elizabeth was so obsessed by her affection for this little creature that a

rumour arose and persisted at the Russian Court that she had exchanged Catherine's child for one of her own, born at the same time. "This report is said to be perfectly true," l'Hôpital wrote to Paris. The Parisians were sceptical; after all, Elizabeth was nearly fifty. Yet this fanatical love for another woman's child, for a child that in all probability had not even her own proud Romanoff blood in his veins, presented a strange psychological problem that could hardly be solved by attributing it to unsatisfied maternal desires. Perhaps this display of exaggerated fondness was intended to silence her own well-grounded suspicions and the gossiping tongues which never ceased to whisper that little Paul was the son of Saltykov. Saltykov was the first man who had rejected her love in favour of Catherine's. Was she trying to revenge herself by taking Catherine's child? This, too, may have played a part in her behaviour. Why should Elizabeth not have shown more affection toward Catherine now that she had granted her most ardent wish? Why was her whole attitude calculated to make her feel that she was no more than a kind of slave, who had fulfilled her function, and could claim no particular thanks nor any particular consideration? She was jealous of Catherine because of this child, and it was the jealousy of an unbridled despot which was thus expressing itself.

Catherine was lonelier than she had even been before. She was barely given the most necessary physical attention. The hated Countess Shuvalov did no more than put her head in at the door from time to time to inquire how she was. While Elizabeth was revelling in the joys of motherhood, and thousands of messengers were carrying news of the happy event to the remotest corners of the immense kingdom, the real mother remained without a glimpse of her son. Forty days after his birth the child was brought to her room for a short while—on the occasion of the public congratulations—but was immediately borne back to the Empress afterwards. "I thought him pretty and the sight of him cheered me a little," writes Catherine. Was she not more wretched than the poorest gipsy

who gives birth to her child on a doorstep? She was cheated of all those intimate joys which compensate every peasant woman, every middle-class mother, for the pain she has suffered. She was never allowed to stroke the downy head of her baby, she did not see his first smile, his first dawning look of recognition. She could not even ask after the little creature's health, for that would have been construed as an insult to the Empress's care. Slowly she realized that her child had been taken from her for ever.

Badly nursed and weighed down with sorrow, she made a slow recovery. Not only her child but Saltykov too had been taken from her. The Empress had sent him to Sweden to inform the Court there of the birth of an heir. The motive behind this move was perfectly clear. Elizabeth no longer had any reason to tolerate an open scandal; she had, on the contrary, every reason for putting an end to it as speedily as possible. Saltykov raised no difficulties. For a long time the existing situation had been merely painful and dangerous as far as he himself was concerned. But if Elizabeth thought that by removing him she could put an end to gossip she was completely mistaken; the gossip merely spread across the whole of Europe. Saltykov felt safe abroad, and the thrilling story of his adventure with the Russian Grand Duchess gave him an irresistible glamour in the eyes of the Swedish ladies. Stories of his indiscretion as well as of his affairs with other women reached Catherine's ears. She suffered agonies of shame, of jealousy and—in spite of everything—of longing for him. Since there was no one in whom she could confide, she hated the sight of everybody. She buried herself in her bed, in her room, in her books, and in her thoughts.

The Grand Duke intruded very little on her loneliness. After the birth of the child, who was named Paul Petrovitch after him, he avoided his wife more and more. He never openly expressed any doubt as to the legitimacy of the boy; indeed, when it came to his ears that Catherine had received a hundred thousand roubles on the occasion of the baptism, he

demanding an equal sum for his share in the happy event. (Since it was obviously feared that he might press his demand in a more embarrassing way, it was hastily granted, and as there happened to be no funds in the treasury at the time, Catherine's money was taken from her.) Peter was a cynic, but he was not utterly insensitive. He accepted a hundred thousand roubles in recognition of the birth of "his" son, but from that time onward he shunned his wife's bed. For nine years he had slept in her room every night—now he broke this symbol of the marriage tie. When he had finished drinking with his lackeys and his Holstein officers he retired to his own room, and he only visited Catherine during the day if he wanted to ask her advice.

She had no child, no husband, no lover. To most women the birth of a first child signifies not only the highest form of happiness, but the full flowering of womanhood. This flowering was denied to Catherine. A ruthless hand had closed the flood-gates, diverting her strongest and healthiest emotions from their natural channel of expression. If Catherine had been allowed to become a loving wife and mother—and her warm, affectionate nature had every inclination toward this—she would certainly have been a more sympathetic character, but perhaps a far less magnificent woman. Those months of desperate loneliness after the birth of her child were the saddest of her life, yet they were of vital importance to her later development. During those months of inhuman degradation and bitterness, the future Catherine, the real Catherine was born, the woman of iron resolution and indomitable will. A weaker character would have succumbed and wasted itself in useless resentment. Catherine was able to transform her thwarted emotions into mental productivity. She read more, thought more, brooded more during those wretched months, than at any other time in her life. She began to see everything in a new and clearer light. Instead of complaining at the unfairness of her life, she set to work to discover the hidden motives that drove human beings to behave as they did. She reviewed her own attitude towards life: for ten years she had

been submissive in all things, had borne all things with patience, had kept herself strictly aloof from politics and partisanship, had striven to win the approval of everyone by practising the virtues of tolerance and amiability. Now she realized that she must use different methods if she was to carve a way for herself through the jungle of Court intrigues. She must have friends on whom she could rely, weapons with which to attack her enemies. She must establish herself as a person of authority who could distribute favours and, if necessary, inspire fear. She must have powerful friends behind her, ally herself with those who were already in power so that she could defy whatever inimical forces might threaten her. She was resolved not to leave her room until she had overcome her sense of humiliation and felt sufficiently strong to face the world in the spirit of her newly acquired determination.

While her thoughts were thus occupied the winter passed, a winter taken up with balls, galas, and entertainments all in honour of the newborn heir, and from which the real heroine, the "happy mother," was absent. Towards the end of the Carnival season Saltykov returned from Sweden. With the help of Vladyslava a rendez-vous was arranged, but—after nearly six months of unhappy separation—Catherine waited in vain for her lover until three o'clock in the morning. On the following day he sent an unconvincing apology, and only a bitter, reproachful letter from Catherine brought him at last to her side. Like all loving and lonely women she was quickly consoled by the presence of the man she loved, yet in her inmost heart she knew that his love—the fleeting love of a born seducer—was dead. She would not admit it; for the moment she could not endure this last, most painful disappointment. She needed strength, and she gathered strength from the elaborate, indulgent lies of her lukewarm lover. On the Grand Duke's birthday she made her first reappearance in public.

Elizabeth had robbed her of her son and of all the joys of motherhood. It was within her power to do this. But even the all-powerful Empress had to bow before the fact that when

## CATHERINE THE GREAT

on the tenth of February 1755, after months of black despair, Catherine returned to the world—wearing a magnificent new dress of blue velvet embroidered all over with gold—it was no longer as the submissive Grand Duchess, but as the imperious mother of the future heir to the throne.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE GRAND DUKE AND THE GRAND DUCHESS

"THE Russian Grand Duke is very incautious in his speech, lives in a state of enmity with the Empress, is held in little respect, indeed in disrespect, by his people, and is too much taken up with his duchy of Holstein," wrote Frederick II, the man whom Peter idolized to such an extent that, although he was heir to the Russian throne, he once said that he would think himself fortunate to be allowed to serve as a sergeant under Frederick. This criticism from his hero seems all the harder if one considers the circumstances in which it was uttered. Europe was buzzing with political dissensions that were keeping Frederick, particularly, in a state of uneasy suspense; a new war with Austria threatened; France, who was Prussia's ally, was at loggerheads with England over the question of the American colonies, and it seemed impossible that any peaceful diplomatic solution could be arrived at; all Frederick's efforts to come to a good understanding with Russia had failed. Elizabeth displayed an unconquerable dislike of the Prussian king, who was informed by his spies that secret alliances had already been made between Russia, Austria and Poland; Bestushev refused the most alluring bribes, though the miserly Frederick had brought himself to make offers which even in free-handed Russia represented a considerable sum of pocket-money. Yet, though he knew that Elizabeth's health was failing, Frederick valued the admiration of her appointed successor so lightly that he said: "I am his Dulcinea. He has never seen me and has fallen in love with me, like Don Quixote." Frederick, who was gifted with human insight, had formed a true estimate of his unknown admirer; he knew that Peter had no definite or practical political pro-

gramme; that he was merely carried away by an exaggerated, obstinate and youthful infatuation for his person. He ignored him, though at that time an alliance with the heir to the Russian throne would have been of great advantage to him: he did not believe that Peter would ever succeed to the throne.

Diplomatic relations between Prussia and Russia had been discontinued since 1750. The only way in which Frederick could obtain news from Russia was indirectly through his ambassador in Paris. But at that period there also existed at the various European courts swarms of "aristocratic travellers" of all nationalities, young noblemen in the service of the various ambassadors and envoys, who in some cases carried on a deliberate system of espionage, or, being exempt from the discretion necessary in an official position, merely collected personal impressions and passed them on without any sense of responsibility. It was from sources such as this that Frederick gleaned his knowledge of Peter's character, of his faults, and the effect which they were having on Russian public opinion. The reports were unanimous. From the very first day Peter had set foot on Russian soil, doubts were entertained as to his fitness for becoming a ruler. But so long as Peter had no son, one was up against a blank wall. There was no other living prince of Romanoff blood, and since no one wished to restore the dethroned and imprisoned Ivan—he had suffered too much already—and since any violation of the law of legitimate succession was out of the question, they had to make the best of Peter, and would have been forced to do so had he been a hundred times more incapable and foolish than he was. Now the birth of little Paul offered a solution; he could be crowned Czar and a Regent appointed for the period of his minority. But who was this Regent to be? There was as yet no necessity to discuss the question openly. Elizabeth was still alive, and though she was in poor health she might easily live another ten or even twenty years. It was within her power to change the order of succession in favour of the infant she loved so passionately, and to nominate a Regent. This thought had already cropped up in many

ambitious heads. The Shuvalovs, for example, were making increasingly frantic efforts to win the Empress completely to their cause.

One thing was certain: no one at that time thought of Catherine. She had been given officially to understand that she had performed her duty by giving birth to a son and, her duty being now fulfilled, she was a person of no further importance. She realized, however, once she had recovered from the physical weakness of her confinement and the effects of her grief, that this son, although he had been taken from her and she herself was given so little credit for his existence, had fundamentally changed and strengthened her position in Russia. Her head was buzzing with new thoughts and schemes; from the first moment of her return to public life her attitude was completely changed and determined on one important point: she dissociated herself definitely and emphatically from her husband.

She had, of course, always been aware of Peter's faults. She knew, even better than Frederick, in what little respect Peter was held by his future subjects. In the past she had done everything in her power to conceal or excuse his faults in the eyes of the world; she had always denied his foolish games with dolls and lead-soldiers, his frequent drunkenness, and his ridiculous love affairs. She had made a firm stand with him against the Tchoglokovs. She had always advised him to the best of her ability: when in 1751 the Swedish Count Lynar had come to Moscow to persuade Peter to exchange Holstein for Oldenburg, the Grand Duke, in spite of his infatuation for everything connected with Holstein, had, owing to financial embarrassment, been ready to make the exchange, and only Catherine had been able to make him realize how such disloyalty to the land of his birth would discredit him as a future Emperor. She had neither loved nor respected her husband, but she had felt that they two were united against the outside world; she had believed that she must stand or fall with him, rise to power or go under at his side. His Romanoff blood was the one thing which could

give her, a German princess, the hope of succeeding to the Russian throne. He had insulted and humiliated her, had bored her beyond words, she had detested, despised and deceived him—but outside the marriage-bed she had been staunchly loyal to him. No matter what was at stake she had always played his game, even if it was to her own disadvantage.

All this was now changed. She had a son who had been christened Paul Petrovitch, for whom, as the youngest scion of the house of Romanoff, prayers had been offered up in every Russian church, whose claim to the throne was unquestioned and unquestionable. She began to realize that, with the support of this child, she need no longer keep up her wearisome and dangerous alliance with Peter. She had not read the *Encyclopædists* without profiting from their teaching; she had learned that behind the most autocratic government lay a public whose opinion could not be ignored with impunity—and Peter was outraging that public opinion afresh every day. It was not for nothing that she had studied Russian history: she had learned that in Russia, more than anywhere else in the world, individual personality, love of an individual, could turn the scales at the critical moment. Peter was unpopular, but she was popular and could become a thousand times more popular in proportion as she publicly displayed the contrast between herself and her husband. Why then should she throw in her destiny and that of her son with the fate of this unfortunate fool Peter, who hated Russia and let Russia know his hatred? She and Peter no longer had anything in common, physically or spiritually, not even the superficial bond of the marriage-bed. Her affair with Saltykov, though it had apparently left Peter unmoved, had broken the last tie between them and opened an abyss which could never again be bridged. It is characteristic of unhappy marriages that not until they are completely shattered does one realize that there was still something left to destroy.

When Catherine (by an ironical coincidence on her husband's birthday) re-appeared in public for the first time, she had made the most important decision of her life: in her heart

she had cut her own destiny loose from that of her husband, and whatever she did in future would be without consideration for him. She continued to help him when he asked for her advice—indeed for many years she managed his Holstein affairs entirely, because the restless and fractious young man was incapable of perusing, studying and dealing with the many boring documents he received from his Duchy. In this way she learned, if only in a minor degree, something of the management of state affairs, learned to weigh opposing interests and reconcile them, but above all she began to appreciate the enormous difficulties which philosophical ideals must encounter in the world of reality. Peter was very pleased with her management of his affairs and gave her the flattering nickname of "*Madame la Ressource*." But the ukase which authorized her to administer Holstein affairs was a secret one; in public Catherine was anything but her husband's helpmate, she took pains to make it clear that her opinions differed from his on every possible score.

About this time a Holsteiner named Brockdorff came to Russia and quickly gained the confidence, friendship, and eventually the complete spiritual dependence of the Grand Duke. Catherine treated this gentleman with insulting coldness, made him the butt of cruel witticisms, and exposed him to the mockery of her household. For the first time in her life she deliberately made an enemy for herself. But her object in doing this was to show, in contrast to Peter, how indifferent she was to everything connected with Holstein. Brockdorff retaliated. If she called him "*the pelican*," he called her "*the viper*." She persisted even when she was an old woman in declaring that Brockdorff was a good-for-nothing and an idiot, but he acted throughout his stay in Russia, at any rate as far as his own interests were concerned, with extreme good sense. He showed great understanding for the whims of the Grand Duke and suggested that instead of his ridiculous lead-soldiers he should send to Holstein for a regiment of real soldiers. Even without this additional expense the Holstein exchequer was without funds, so that Peter was perpetually in

financial difficulties, but he seized enthusiastically on the idea. In order to carry it out, however, the co-operation, or any rate the acquiescence, of the new Chamberlain, Alexander Shuvalov, was necessary. Brockdorff assured him that he would have the eternal goodwill of the future Emperor if he would humour him in this matter. Why raise difficulties? It was, when all was said and done, only a harmless amusement for Peter.

It was only a harmless amusement but an extremely dangerous and tactless move at this juncture, when the threat of impending war hung over the country—the threat of a war with Prussia! The regiment of Russian Guards who were stationed at Oranienbaum and knew that in all likelihood they would soon have to march into battle for their country, eyed the foreign troops who were pitching their camp in the neighbourhood of the palace with undisguised fury. “They have sent us traitors,” they grumbled. “These damned Germans are all sold to the King of Prussia.” Alexander Shuvalov stood on the balcony as the Holstein regiment filed past and blinked his eyes, a nervous habit he had when agitated. He was turning things over in his mind: he had secured the goodwill of his future Emperor, but in doing so he had allowed Peter to make himself utterly impossible. The Grand Duke was offending and antagonizing everyone. He spent all his time in the Holstein camp. He, the captain of two Russian regiments, was seen day in day out wearing the Holstein uniform, which, when Tchoglov had been alive, he had only been allowed to wear secretly in his own room. He drilled his troops in the Prussian manner. What did it all mean, people were asking themselves. There was not the slightest sympathy in Russia, any more than in the rest of the world, with the exception of Germany, for this delight in militarism as an end in itself, for this pre-occupation with barrack-room details of presenting arms, saluting and polishing buttons. Peter’s passion for uniforms was rightly considered quite un-Russian and his sergeant-major fanaticism unworthy of a future ruler. The least intelligent observer could see that Peter’s love for militarism was of a

superficial nature. He had never read a serious work on strategy, he never sought out the company of experienced military experts. What attracted him was the coloured uniform, the rough life of the soldier which gave him, the weakling, with his delicate health and nervous manner, an illusion of manly self-confidence which he was unable to find in any other way. All that he learned from his Holstein soldiers was to smoke a pipe and to swear good round Prussian oaths. One morning his old tutor, Stehlin, saw him sitting on the grass surrounded by his soldiers, with a bottle of beer beside him and a long pipe in his mouth; when the worthy Swabian, who knew that Peter was always upset by the smell of tobacco, expressed his astonishment, the young man shouted: "What are you gaping at, you foolish old devil? Have you ever seen a real soldier who did not smoke a pipe?" If he called the best of his teachers a "foolish old devil" for so little reason, how did he address his underlings when he was angry? He considered it soldierly to shout at them, box their ears, curse them, and occasionally throw even more solid insults at their heads. From the most exalted courtier to the meanest lackey in the land there was only one opinion concerning Peter's behaviour, and that was by no means flattering.

All this time Catherine was trying to express her disapproval of her husband's behaviour as openly as possible. She never went near the Holstein camp. In her daily walks with her ladies she ostentatiously turned in an opposite direction and told everyone who was prepared to listen, even the lackeys, the gardeners and grooms, that she detested Peter's militarism with her whole heart, and above all resented the presence of foreign troops near the palace. This was widely repeated, and eventually reached the ears of those for whom it was intended, the Russian soldiers, who learned to regard her as a Russian patriot, and to forget her German origin. While Peter was drilling his soldiers she, with the help of her Italian gardener, was laying out a beautiful garden. While he cursed and swore and was ready on the slightest provocation to be rude and aggressive, she displayed the most equable friendliness to every

one. But when Peter, after the departure of the troops, gave elaborate parties to which he invited actresses and dancers, she remained in her rooms, pleading the excuse of a headache. This was not altogether consistent with her natural sociability and her democratic views, but, since the wine flowed freely at these parties and her absence encouraged them to develop into Bacchanalian orgies, the fact that she dissociated herself from them gave her a reputation for sobriety which won general approval. She had a talent for performing those simple actions and gestures which conjure up a vivid and sympathetic picture in the minds of simple people. This is a talent shared in common by all those who are darlings of the people, be they crowned heads or revolutionaries. It is partly an actor's trick, but the dramatization is unconscious, and is as essential to the nature of the leader as other less obvious characteristics. The modest and virtuous Grand Duchess planting her flowers and trees, while her husband jeered at the Russian soldiery and got drunk in the company of dubious women, was a tableau devised by the gifted Catherine, who had decided to repudiate her stupid and useless husband. But it was based on a real and honest understanding of the soul of the people, and it was this understanding which Peter lacked. Lately Catherine had taken special pains to observe the dogmas and customs of the Greek Church; Peter, who considered himself a German and Lutheran, mocked at them, neglected the prescribed ritual, and even interrupted the Church services by loud laughter and talking. So far Catherine had practised a kind of mechanical piety, which in time was rendered still more meaningless by the influence on her mind of the French Rationalists; her present attitude, it must be confessed, was adopted purely for the sake of effect. It added another popular feature to the sympathetic part she was playing. One might justifiably reproach her, as a disciple of Voltaire, for adopting this attitude toward religion, but it must be remembered that opportunism is the religion of all great rulers. And no one in eighteenth-century Europe was more keenly aware of this than Voltaire.

The first person to realize, approve and support her new bid for power was her one-time enemy, Bestushev. The Chancellor was an ardent card-player and gambler in his leisure hours, which was possibly a psychological compensation for the fact that in dealing with politics he was sober and calculating to a degree. Although he was twenty years older than Elizabeth he was determined to outlive the voluptuous Empress, who was dissipating her energies so foolishly. Two problems vexed his peace of mind. How, so long as Elizabeth was alive, was he to counteract the influence of the Shuvalovs, which was increasing day by day; and how, after Elizabeth's death, was he to deal with Peter, the blind slave of Frederick II? He was adrift in a sea of uncertainty, and he felt the need of some island on which to take refuge in case of a storm. His only hope was Catherine. He decided to strengthen her position so that before long she would be powerful enough to give him support. He began to prepare her for her future position as Empress, and at the same time to make himself indispensable to the future Empress. It was he who had persuaded Catherine to undertake the administration of his Holstein affairs for Peter, because this "might be of assistance in that other bigger plan for the future." He, who had previously vetoed any attempt at letter-writing, now acted as an intermediary in her correspondence with Johanna Elizabeth. He aided and abetted Catherine in every possible way.

But he was an old man, and Catherine was a young and passionate woman. Bestushev was no connoisseur on matters of the heart, as his *Instructions* betrayed only too plainly, but twenty years in the service of an Empress like Elizabeth had taught him to recognize the dangers which a woman's foolish heart may throw in the way of a serious politician. Any good-looking coxcomb could overturn his plans in a single night, and divert Catherine's loyalty. He could not make her immune to the lure of ardent young love, but he could take time by the forelock and provide this lonely, emotionally starved young woman with a man who would serve his interests as well as hers. The Baltic Count Lehndorff, who was not only

tall and handsome, but a man completely after Bestushev's own heart, presented the ideal solution for this problem.

On the feast of Saint Peter and Paul, Bestushev took his young protégé with him to Oranienbaum, to introduce him to the Grand Duchess. The Empress had given orders that the Court should celebrate this holiday, the most important festival in the Russian calendar, at Oranienbaum; she herself stayed behind at Peterhof with little Paul. Catherine was not even allowed to see her son on his first name-day, but was forced to act as official hostess at Oranienbaum, receiving the guests who were arriving in an endless stream of carriages—heads of the nobility, of the army, and distinguished diplomats. She had no suspicion that this day was to decide the fate of her heart. After dinner Count Lehndorff was introduced to her together with a young Polish nobleman, a Count Stanislas Poniatovsky, who was in the service of the newly-appointed English ambassador. Catherine received them with the gracious words and brilliant smile of a woman who knows she is looking her best. As soon as the introduction had been made she was surrounded by a group of Bestushev's spies, who sang the praises of Count Lehndorff and waited for her to express her approval of him. Catherine admitted quite frankly that of the two young men she preferred the Pole. The tale-bearers hurried back to inform Bestushev of this disappointing news, but only one of them, Leo Narychkin, thought of repeating her words to Poniatovsky. They were like a spark to dry tinder: Poniatovsky had already been dazzled by the Grand Duchess's beauty; now he was passionately in love.

The young Polish count was a typical "aristocratic traveller." His father, and his mother's family, the Czartoryskis, were the backbone of the new Russian movement in Poland, which opposed the ruling elector, August of Saxony. Stanislas had been educated in France by such teachers as Choiseul, the Abbé Berni, and the famous Madame Geoffrin, and now his parents had sent their son to Petersburg with the English ambassador, so that he might work unobtrusively for Polish interests in Russia and at the same time carve out a political

career for himself. He brought to his task a pleasant Slav countenance, sentimental blue eyes, a slim but elegant figure, a somewhat feminine grace, and a portfolio full of introductions. So far he had been extremely well received wherever he went in Russia.

On the journey from Oranienbaum back to the capital late that night, Poniatovsky was easily able to draw his friend the English ambassador into a long discussion about Catherine. Sir Charles Henry Williams was no less enthusiastic than his young protégé; he had sat next to Catherine at dinner.

Williams had come to Russia a few weeks before on a very delicate and important mission. The Subsidies Treaty made in 1742 was on the point of expiring, at a moment when war between England and France seemed inevitable, and Prussia, who was the ally of France, was displaying a most disquieting desire for expansion in the direction of Hanover. Williams' predecessor had been unsuccessful in securing a renewal of the treaty mainly because, being an old and feeble man, he was unable to interview the Empress on the only occasions when she was accessible, namely at balls, festivities and masquerades. During his term of office at the Court of King Augustus of Poland, Sir Charles had proved himself not only a good diplomat but also a man of the world, young enough to be pleasing to women and old enough not to be lured from his duties. He knew what was in the minds of his superiors when they sent him to Petersburg, for in his first despatch he wrote: "The Empress's health is very bad; she suffers from a cough and from breathlessness, she has water on the knee and dropsy—but she danced a minuet with me." This letter betrays Williams' tendency to boast: a woman who was really suffering from all these diseases could not possibly have danced a minuet, even if Apollo himself had stepped down from Olympus to ask her. But Williams was that most dangerous type of optimist, a dreamer. He had hardly whispered his first compliment into the Empress's ear when he already saw a hundred thousand Russians marching against England's foes. But however much it may have pleased

Elizabeth to listen to the blandishments of this handsome Englishman, the moment he attempted to speak to her of politics she became bored and inattentive. As a woman she was responsive to any compliment, even the most banal, but as an Empress she was deaf. Since his arrival Williams had not advanced a step further than his predecessor.

He had come to Oranienbaum full of curiosity. He had looked about for some firm foothold in this bewildering country, and his mind had naturally turned to the ruler of to-morrow, Peter. But his very first interview had dashed this hope: he could discover in Peter neither seriousness nor intelligence, nothing, in fact, save a blind, fanatical worship for the King of Prussia. Then he had been placed at table beside the Grand Duchess, and before the last course was removed Williams realized that he had at last found his natural ally, a cultured European, such as he was accustomed to dealing with, who was not only able to appreciate intelligent conversation but could furnish it herself, who took a keen interest in political problems, and in addition to all this cherished a profound hatred of the Prussian King. The next day Williams wrote to London: "The Grand Duchess is not only convinced that Frederick is the natural and most dangerous enemy of Russia, she also hates him personally. She said to me that Prince Henry of Prussia had not so much intelligence as his brother, but on the other hand he had not such a wicked nature as the Prussian King, which was certainly the worst in the world."

This was music in Williams' ears, especially coming from the lips of a beautiful young woman, accompanied by bright glances from a pair of lovely eyes. Williams had been prepared in the interests of England to pay court to the ageing Elizabeth. To love Catherine for England's sake was a much easier task and one that promised greater success. With a recklessness that belied both his age and his nationality, he abandoned himself to this promising new passion.

The young Pole, who was supposed to be in his charge, was far more cautious. Before he embarked on the tempting adventure, he considered the possible outcome. He had heard

that all Russian princesses were merciless to their lovers when they tired of them. What had spurred on Saltykov—the danger—made him hesitate. He wanted to flee from his own passion, but when he saw Catherine—"her black hair, her dazzlingly white skin, her long dark lashes, her Grecian nose, her mouth which seemed to ask for kisses, her perfect arms and hands, her dignified and noble bearing"—when he heard her laughter which was as gay as her temperament, he forgot there was such a place as Siberia. In any case it was by this time too late to run away. Sharp eyes had already noticed the exchange of ardent glances, busy-bodies were at hand ready, in their own interests, to stir up the fires on both sides. There was Bestushev, perfectly willing to encourage Poniatovsky since Lehndorff had failed to please, and Narychkin, the former intimate of Saltykov, who was quite prepared to continue his services as an obliging friend to Saltykov's successor. When he fell ill, he employed Poniatovsky to write letters to Catherine on his behalf. They were of the least imaginable importance, requests for fruit, preserves, and the like, but the lovesick secretary devoted such care, wit, and ardour to their composition, that Catherine's attention was caught, and when she was informed of the writer's identity she was both flattered and delighted. The timid lover, whose fascination was only enhanced by his reserve, received encouragement from all sides and, half enticed, half pushed, he finally stumbled up the back staircase which Saltykov had discovered before him.

Poniatovsky was not as handsome as his predecessor, but he had other advantages, which were more valuable in the circumstances: he possessed all the qualities necessary to comfort an injured and disappointed woman. His homage was sincere, deep, and tender; it was offered not merely to the Grand Duchess, to the beautiful and dazzling woman, but to Catherine's mind and personality which were infinitely superior to his own, and which he duly appreciated and admired. He was faithful, attentive, discreet, gallant and extremely affectionate. It was he who first taught Catherine to know the full

happiness of love; she drank deep draughts of it, it intoxicated her, lent her wings, released all the recklessness of her hot and impulsive nature. "I am the boldest woman in the world," she said triumphantly. "I can be foolhardy when necessary." This was no boast; it was the truth. The words themselves, which were a challenge, proved it; the future was to prove it a hundredfold. So far she had only been able to show her daring on the back of a spirited horse. Now that the ardent love of a man worthy of love was daily restoring and strengthening the self-confidence which had been so sorely wounded, she found a hundred new ways of expressing her bubbling high spirits. It was not enough that her lover should visit her with the friendly assistance of bribed servants, she must needs disguise herself as a man and leave the palace by night, going through the anteroom where her husband was tippling, past the sentries, and so to the Narychkins', where she spent the gayest hours of her life among a circle of intimate friends. Sometimes she could find no carriage to take her home and she would walk back in the grey hours through the silent streets. It was an adventure that might have cost her her life, but she undertook it for the sheer fun of the thing. These were the reactions of an ardent temperament, which for ten years had been kept under a perpetual check.

She now had two powerful allies: Bestushev and Williams. Bestushev was willing to befriend Poniatovsky, since Lehdorff had not found favour. He would have preferred the Baltic Count, who was a colourless young man, for Poniatovsky' though he had no official mission, had a number of private axes to grind; but he had to make the best of it. He supported the cause of the Czartoryskis in Russia, not altogether to his own advantage, and pretended deafness when Poniatovsky held the Polish Prime Minister, Brühl, and even his king up to ridicule. Bestushev had no choice. He was powerful, but his power was no more than an empty nutshell; perfect on the outside but worm-eaten within. Elizabeth allowed her Chancellor to govern for her, but he was no longer in her good graces. He frequently did not see her for months on end.

She hardly troubled herself any longer about the government of the country. Fits of self-indulgence and pious expiation alternated more rapidly than ever, and both were of a morbid character. Sometimes the Empress drank until she collapsed into a state of unconsciousness. Her ladies-in-waiting could not even undress her; they were obliged to cut the stiff silk garments from her body in order to get her to bed. Sometimes she knelt for days on end before an ikon, spoke to it aloud, and swore that it had given her advice. But most of her time was spent in vain attempts to restore her lost beauty. Hundreds of apothecaries were kept busy mixing salves and lotions, she experimented with Oriental and French remedies to obliterate the ravages of sickness, alcohol, excesses, and old age. It took hours to complete her toilet and often she did not put in an appearance at official receptions until after midnight, because she had changed her coiffure three times before she was satisfied with her reflection. She was too tired, too much occupied with herself, either to defend Bestushev from the attacks of the Shuvalovs or to remove him from the government in favour of the Shuvalovs.

One day Bestushev sent Poniatovsky to Catherine with the draft of a ukase, to come into force on Elizabeth's death, by which Catherine was appointed joint Regent with her husband. Joint Regent . . .? Both Catherine and Bestushev knew precisely what that meant. Catherine would manage the affairs of Russia as she had managed those of Holstein . . . independently. Actually there was nothing very remarkable about this plan, which was still quite vague, except the secrecy with which it was discussed. This was significant of the change in Bestushev's position. A few years earlier he would have discussed and settled the question of the succession with the Empress herself; now he was forced to act like a conspirator in considering the future interests of Russia. But in safeguarding the interests of Russia, he was not forgetting his own: under the scheme he had drawn up no less than three ministerial positions were reserved for himself.

Williams, Catherine's second confederate, was at first a

trifle disappointed that his young protégé should have been preferred to himself, but he soon resigned himself to the rôle of a fatherly friend. As such he could be in and out of Catherine's apartments even more freely. She continued to delight in his stimulating company, his irony, his biting wit, and to accept his resigned admiration. Though she had chosen the other man to be her lover, Williams was able to establish an influence over the Grand Duchess through Poniatovsky, who lived with him in the Skaviensky palace and whom he always called "my dear son." There was a second factor working in his favour. For years Catherine had found herself in ever increasing financial difficulties. New debts had been added to those of her mother's, for which she had taken responsibility, and this was not surprising when one considers that with a yearly income of 30,000 roubles she squandered approximately 18,000 roubles every year on faro. She was an incorrigible spendthrift, and remained so to the end of her life, though at the same time she had a certain regard for order, and herself preferred simple pleasures to expensive extravagances. But when it was a matter of buying allegiance with money or gifts she lost all sense of proportion and moderation. She was very rarely guilty of deliberate bribery; her generosity was simply a manifestation of her optimistic temperament which desired to see only the happy faces of well-wishers about her. Now she herself was to become the victim of a similar form of bribery; Williams opened a credit account for her with the English consul, the banker, Baron Wolff, and Catherine drew nearly 100,000 roubles from this source in the course of a single year.

Catherine's corruptibility was a result of the widespread corruptibility that existed at the Russian Court; she allowed herself to be bribed in order that she might be able to bribe others; everyone was corruptible from the meanest lackey to the Empress herself. In August, Williams informed his king that Elizabeth had begun to build two palaces and that she needed money to finish them. The Subsidies Treaty guaranteed Russia an annual income of £50,000 sterling, but

Williams thought that a further contribution to Elizabeth's private purse would bind her to English interests even beyond the conditions of the Treaty. "In a word, all that has so far been given has served to buy the Russian troops; whatever may be further given will serve to buy the Empress."

The extra grant was sanctioned, and on September 30th Williams reported triumphantly to London that the renewal of the Subsidies Treaty had been accomplished.

His triumph was premature. Instead of the praise he expected he received a sharp rebuke from England. "You have brought upon yourself the high displeasure of His Majesty because you have lowered his dignity by appending your signature after those of the Russian ministers; until this error is rectified, His Majesty will not ratify the Treaty signed by you." This was not in itself a very serious matter. The Russian Chancellery had no objections to preparing a new copy of the Treaty with Williams' signature in the position required by King George. But the courier who carried back this copy was delayed by adverse winds, and when the document bearing the signatures of the English Cabinet finally arrived in Petersburg, the situation had changed completely. On the 5th of January 1756, Frederick had concluded the Treaty of Westminster with the King of England.

This was a cruel blow for Williams. Yet he still hoped, with a blind and fanatical optimism seldom found in English diplomats, that in spite of the changed position he might win the support of Russia against France, or at any rate secure Russia's neutrality, so that Prussia could launch her offensive unhindered against France. So far his duty had been to operate against Frederick—now his instructions were to create sympathy for England's new ally. This new task really called for a new man—but Williams firmly believed, and succeeded in convincing his government, that he held the best cards in the game, namely, the support of Catherine and, through her, that of the Chancellor, Bestushev. He was so sure of himself that indirectly through London he got in touch with Frederick,

and offered him his services as a sort of "unofficial envoy"; he received instructions from the Prussian king and sent back messages calculated to strengthen his hopes for the neutrality of Russia. Even when, following the Treaty of Westminster, France concluded the Treaty of Versailles with Austria, and Elizabeth joined the alliance, when Russia was arming against Prussia, and General Apraxin was on the point of joining the troops, Williams, disregarding the Empress's orders and the decisions of the government, continued to think out new and ever more fantastic plans for delaying the departure of the Russian troops and keeping the eastern frontier of Prussia clear. He deluded himself and consequently deluded both his own government and the Prussians. He believed that he held Catherine in the hollow of his hand, but he overestimated her power; he believed and gave his superiors to believe that Catherine was ready and able to detain General Apraxin in Russia, or else induce him to commit high treason; he sent Frederick a detailed (and, as it transpired later, an incorrect) account of the Russian plan of campaign, which Catherine was supposed to have heard from Apraxin's own lips and betrayed to Williams; he was instructed through Mitchell, the English ambassador in Berlin, to bribe Apraxin with the help of Catherine! "General Apraxin," wrote Mitchell on the 8th January 1757, "is entirely devoted to the Grand Duchess. He is completely unwarlike, and has a very bad opinion of his army—it can, therefore, be assumed that he does not wish to enter into open battle with the Prussians. Moreover Apraxin is extravagant and perpetually in debt. The King of Prussia believes one might offer Apraxin a large sum of money and induce him to check the advance of the Russian army; a General can easily find a pretext. If the Grand Duchess is willing, she can be used as go-between."

These letters are still extant, but there is also a letter from Catherine to Bestushev, dated January 30th, 1757, in which she writes: "I have heard with pleasure that our army is about to put our Declaration into action—we should be covered with shame if it were not fulfilled. I beg you to urge our

mutual friend (Apraxin), when he has beaten the King of Prussia, to force him back to his old frontiers, so that we may not have to be perpetually on the *qui vive*." What was the truth? Was Catherine deceiving Williams or Bestushev? Was Williams lying, or was Catherine lying, that Frederick should believe he was being informed by her of the movements of the Russian troops, while at the same time she was writing to Apraxin wishing him a sweeping and speedy victory for the Russian army? Neither the extremely painful inquiry which took place a year later, nor a hundred years of historical research have been able to throw any light on this question. Catherine's political sympathies were clear enough, but she was in a difficult position. She saw eye to eye with Bestushev; like him she regarded Prussia as Russia's natural enemy and, despite the Treaty of Westminster, agreed with him in advocating strict neutrality toward England; like Bestushev, she feared the appearance of the English fleet in the Baltic Sea, and consequently became an opponent of the French faction which, in order to relieve the French fleet in the Channel, was endeavouring to bring about a war between England and Russia. To the French, friendship with England was as important as friendship with Prussia, so that the interests of the Allies were by no means harmonious.

Catherine was actually on excellent terms with Apraxin, and she attached great importance to this friendship, for the General stood in high favour both with Bestushev and the Shuvalovs, and she hoped one day to make use of him as an intermediary. Before his departure, Apraxin had frequently visited the Grand Duchess, and had taken the opportunity of explaining to her that the state of the Russian troops was such that a winter campaign against Prussia seemed inadvisable and that it would be better to wait until the spring before declaring hostilities. But Apraxin had had similar conversations with the Empress, with Bestushev, with representatives of the Conference and the Embassies. It is possible that Catherine repeated the gist of these conversations to Williams, unaware that she was speaking, not to the official English ambassador, but to the

secret agent of the Prussian king. Williams could have discovered these facts from a dozen other sources; his object in learning them from the lips of the Grand Duchess can only have been to lend them greater authority. The fact that the departure of the fat, easy-going Apraxin was postponed from week to week, that the intervention of the Allies was necessary to move Russia to active participation in the coalition, was not—as Williams indicated in his reports to Frederick—the result of Catherine's machinations, but simply a result of the insufficient equipment of the troops, their lack of enthusiasm for war, and above all the collapse of Russian finances.

Even if at this time no one in Russia had any idea that Frederick was receiving reports from one of the Grand Duchess's intimates, her situation was none the less ambiguous. She had accepted money from Williams, and she was in love with his friend and protégé, Poniatovsky. Neither of these facts could long remain a secret. In the despatches sent by the French ambassador the subject of English gold had frequently been discussed. Poniatovsky, it is true, was as circumspect as Saltykov had been indiscreet, but that was of little help. One day Graf Horn, a distinguished Swede, visited Catherine's room and her little dog barked furiously at him. A few minutes later Poniatovsky entered, and the little animal greeted him with eager tail-wagging. "My friend," said Horn to Poniatovsky, "there are no worse traitors than lap-dogs. When I am in love with a woman, the first thing I do is to give her one of these animals. Through them I have always been able to discover very quickly if anyone else is being preferred to myself. But do not be alarmed—I am discreet." It is possible that Count Horn really was discreet, but he was not the only person who was making observations of this kind. And Poniatovsky, though he was completely the slave of his passion, was by no means indifferent to politics. He hated his king, intrigued against him and belittled him at every opportunity. Since August of Saxony was at war with Prussia, these attacks had the effect of an indirect expression of sympathy with Frederick. They were interpreted as such particularly by Peter, who immediately took Poniatovsky to his

heart. (What else was to be expected? He was under a compulsion to love all the men who loved his wife and succeeded in winning her!) But it was not Peter alone who saw in Poniatovsky a secret enemy of "the good cause"—as the war, the alliance against Frederick, was universally called. There were frequent complaints about him to Paris; from Paris, the Abbé Berni wrote to Warsaw; the Saxon-Polish Court implored Elizabeth to dismiss this alarming young man. Elizabeth dismissed him willingly and promptly. "The day is won!" the French party exclaimed when Poniatovsky left Russia.

But Catherine was not the same woman she had been six years before. She was not going to allow Poniatovsky to be torn from her as easily as Saltykov. For the first time she let Bestushev feel the power of the future Empress as, in his own interests, he wished to make her. She ordered him to request the Saxon-Polish cabinet to send Poniatovsky back to Petersburg in the official capacity of ambassador. Bestushev was reluctant to do this, but he had no choice. He put it to Count Brühl in Warsaw that it would be a diplomatic error to alienate the Grand Ducal Court at this moment by a refusal. For three months Brühl fought with Bestushev, the entire Alliance fought with the desires of the lovesick Catherine, and at last Poniatovsky returned to Russia with the ministerial portfolio under his arm and the order of the White Eagle on his breast.

In the summer of 1757 France, as a member of the Alliance, sent a new ambassador to Petersburg in the person of the Marquis l'Hôpital. As Paris was well informed both as to Elizabeth's increasing lethargy and Catherine's growing influence, the Marquis was advised to "please the Empress, but at the same time to ingratiate himself as much as possible to the young Court." When l'Hôpital paid his first visit to the summer palace, Catherine received him. Surrounded by four hundred gaily dressed ladies, she bade the Frenchman welcome. They waited as long as possible for Elizabeth, but finally sat down to table and opened the Ball without her. It was a light Russian evening, the room had to be artificially darkened to enjoy the

full effect of the twelve hundred candles which had been lighted. Then, at last, in the milder, gentler candle light, Elizabeth appeared. Her face was still lovely, but this time her swollen legs did not permit her to dance a minuet with the newcomer. After a few friendly words, she retired to the gallery and sadly watched the brilliant scene in which she herself had so often been the centre of attraction.

L'Hôpital was not equal to his dual mission. Very soon he fell completely under the influence of the Shuvalovs, whose francomania was as ridiculous and exaggerated as Peter's passion for everything Prussian. L'Hôpital's attempts to win Peter's sympathies for France met with coarse ridicule, and Catherine made him nervous. He regarded her as being entirely under the influence of Bestushev, Williams, and Poniatovsky: "*un trio d'un coquin, d'un fou et d'un fat,*" and he had no means of counteracting the influence of these three—the influence of power, of money, and of love—so he contented himself with reporting to his government that any attempt to win the young Court was useless: "The Grand Duke is as completely a Prussian as the Grand Duchess is an incorrigible English-woman."

At last, in August 1757, the Russian Army marched into action. They captured the fortress of Memel without encountering any very serious resistance, and on the 17th of August, won a sweeping victory at Gross-Jägerndorf. There was wild joy in Petersburg, Vienna, and Versailles. The Allies were already visualizing the Russians overrunning the whole of East Prussia, uniting with Maria Theresa's army on the Silesian border; already they saw the Prussian upstart beaten, conquered and crushed. Then the unaccountable happened: instead of profiting by his victory to advance as swiftly as possible, Apraxin first hesitated for two weeks and then returned by a series of forced marches, which had the appearance of a flight rather than a tactical retreat, to the fortress of Memel—burning villages on the way, destroying his stores and powder, and abandoning the guns.

What had happened? On the 27th of August a Council of

War was held in Petersburg, at which it was decided to recall Apraxin, because it was found impossible to provision the advancing Russian army, and the troops were on the point of starvation. Apraxin had been obliged to burn the villages because the enemy, desirous of forcing a second battle, was on his heels. Little of this was known in Vienna or Paris. On the other hand, different rumours had been spreading. Elizabeth (of whom l'Hôpital had reported only a short time previously that "contrary to all rumours, she is in excellent health") had on the 8th of September fallen unconscious while leaving Church, was bled in the public square in the midst of a crowd of people who had come to Mass from the neighbouring villages, and for many days had not recovered her powers of speech. The connection between this serious attack of Elizabeth's and Apraxin's retreat seemed obvious; it was common knowledge that Peter was a staunch supporter of Frederick, and that Catherine was under William's influence. Apraxin, it was rumoured, had been informed of Elizabeth's imminent death and had hurried back to the frontier, either in obedience to Peter's policy, or—and this seemed more probable—to put his soldiers at Catherine's service, if she should need their help in her fight for supremacy.

Catherine was at first entirely unaware of these rumours. When she learned of Apraxin's retreat and saw the bad effect it was having on people's spirits, she wrote to the General a second time imploring him, in the name of heaven, to continue the advance. She received no answer to this letter; the Petersburg cabinet had decided to sacrifice Apraxin to the wrath of the Allies. He was deprived of his rank, kept a prisoner at Riga, and ordered to be court-martialled. His place was taken by General Fermor.

The second sacrifice was Williams. His conspiracy with Frederick was not, it is true, officially known, but it was suspected, and his friendship with Catherine made the danger doubly grave. In October 1757, George II was informed that his Ambassador's presence was no longer desired in Russia ("qu'il est devenu odieux à la cour") and by the end of October

Williams had left the large building of the English embassy, which was situated exactly opposite the much smaller one occupied by the French embassy, on the other side of a canal which was nicknamed the "Pas de Calais." Before the arrival of the new English ambassador, Lord Keith, the tenancy of these two buildings was transferred, to symbolize the relative importance at that juncture of the two foreign powers in Russia; l'Hôpital moved into the big house and Keith had to be content with the small one. Williams' departure upset Catherine so much, that she wept for a whole day. On his arrival in London, Williams produced a letter from the Grand Duchess written in her own hand, which ran as follows: "I will use every conceivable opportunity of persuading Russia to enter into a friendly alliance with England, in which I see the real interests of my country. I will always put the interests of England first, where I consider this to be necessary to the welfare of Europe and particularly of Russia, against the common enemy, France, whose greatness is a disgrace to Russia." This letter is couched in the tone of an autocrat, who has decided upon her own policy, and has no doubt that the moment is at hand when she will have the power to carry out her programme.

Her self-confidence was now fully developed and ready to challenge the whole world. She was once more pregnant, and this time no one had any doubt as to the paternity of the child—not even Peter. He himself was having numerous affairs with singers and ladies of the Court, and he had a permanent relationship with the niece of the Vice-Chancellor, Vorontzov. He had a real liking for Poniatovsky, and had personally intervened with the Viennese ambassador, Esterhazy, to put a stop to the intrigues which were continually cropping up against the Polish minister. But, being naturally tactless, frequently drunk, and often annoyed with his wife for quite other reasons, he said on one occasion in the full hearing of everyone at table: "The devil knows where my wife manages to get with child. I really don't know whether I shall take the responsibility for this one." Leo Narychkin, who was a witness of this scene, hurried away anxiously to tell Catherine. "You are fools," she said calmly, "go at once to

the Grand Duke and ask him to give you his oath that he has not slept with his wife. And tell him, if he swears this, that you will go immediately to Alexander Shuvalov and inform him." We shall never know whether Peter was or was not in a position to take this oath with a clear conscience. In any case, he had no desire for painful complications. "Go to the devil and never mention the subject to me again!" was all he replied to Catherine's messenger.

There was nothing to fear from Peter. It was the French who never ceased to press for the removal of the tiresome Pole. When Catherine heard that Count Brühl had received instructions to recall Poniatovsky, she wrote to Bestushev: "I know that Count Brühl would obey you, even if you commanded him to give up his daily bread. If you will only act as I wish, no one will dare to oppose your will." Catherine's sense of power grew proportionately as Elizabeth's health was failing, and she did not hesitate to use all her power to keep her lover at her side. For the second time she was victorious. Bestushev commanded and Brühl obeyed. He wrote: "They are so well satisfied with Count Poniatovsky here, that there is no question of his recall." Poniatovsky remained—but the bow was stretched to snapping point.

In December Catherine gave birth to a daughter. When the midwife saw that her labour was beginning, the Grand Duke was informed, and he arrived, dressed in his Holstein uniform, spurred, booted, and with his sword at his side. When the astonished Catherine demanded an explanation of this elaborate display in her sick-room, he replied: "It is only in the hour of need that one knows one's true friends. In this uniform as a Holstein officer, I am prepared to protect the Ducal House against all enemies. As you are feeling unwell, I have come to your aid." He was undoubtedly drunk, but a keen ear might have detected the suppressed fury of a deceived husband in these absurd bombastic words.

Catherine's second confinement was very different from her first. Again the baby daughter was snatched from her mother as soon as she was born and taken to the Empress, but this

time Catherine was prepared and felt very little distress; all maternal instincts had died in her. It is true that again no one bothered about the mother, the Court celebrated without her, the Grand Duke got drunk with his boon companions; but this time Catherine had made preparations to amuse herself, and if her entertainment was a secret one, its daring nature was proof of her new sense of security. On the pretext of feeling cold, she had a number of screens arranged round her bed, forming a secret alcove with a means of exit through the ante-room, which could be shut off by drawing a curtain at the side of the bed. In this alcove she arranged chairs, tables, and a comfortable settee, so that when the curtain was thrown back she could entertain a cheerful gathering of her friends, who entered through the ante-room, but could at any moment, be hidden from view by drawing the curtain. One evening, while a lively conversation was in progress, a dangerous visitor knocked at the door in the person of Alexander Shuvalov, whom Catherine always called the "Grand Inquisitor." Everything went off splendidly, the company behind the curtain made no sound, and the great man departed, after a long talk with Catherine, in the firm conviction that he had been alone with her. The success of this ruse encouraged the visitors to demand food and drink. Catherine rang and ordered her supper which was to consist of six large helpings for she was dying of hunger. Her orders were obeyed to the letter and an hour later the bewildered servants removed the empty dishes. Catherine described this as "one of the gayest events of my life."

She had grown over-confident. Poniatovsky's adoration, the respectful homage of Williams, Bestushev's complaisance, had gone to her head. She became reckless in her pleasures, and arrogant toward her enemies. She made fun of the Shuvalovs, cut the French ambassador, and even failed in her usual respect toward Elizabeth. Self-confidence gave her an irresistible fascination. "A woman for whose sake a real man would gladly suffer a few thrashings," said General Lieven. She was beautiful, though perhaps not as perfectly, as definitely beautiful as Elizabeth had been in her heyday. But she out-

shone her rival in wit, she possessed a gay, even, and sparkling temperament, and, above all, an unparalleled gift for handling her fellow-creatures. Everyone who met her fell a victim to the charm of her personality. There were some who felt afraid of her "fiery glance like that of a wild animal," but these were exceptions. Most people felt at their best in her company, for she had a gift for talking to everyone of what interested them most, and invariably gave other people the opportunity of appearing at their best advantage. Her friends already saw the crown of Russia on her head, and her enemies knew that they must reckon with this possibility. They intrigued against Catherine, but at the same time they vied for her favour.

It was only in her most intimate circle of friends that she occasionally detected a hint of open opposition; her ladies-in-waiting sometimes failed to pay her the respect due to her. The ladies-in-waiting were on the side of Peter who chose first one and then another of them as the object of his attentions, and each cherished a secret hope that she might one day be called upon to fill the part of a Pompadour. The lady who seemed to have the best chance of such a future was the Countess Vorontzov. She managed to keep the fickle Peter permanently under her sway, in spite of the violent quarrels they had from time to time, when not only curses but blows were known to fly. In Catherine's opinion, she was the stupidest and ugliest woman at Court. Catherine's verdict on Peter's innamoratas was always unkind. Sometimes, in spite of her dislike of him, it almost seemed as if, unlike Peter, she nursed a kind of a bourgeois jealousy; at any rate, she never ceased to wonder angrily how he could prefer other less attractive women to herself. But even the German Scherer, a champion of Peter's, said of Elizabeth Vorontzov: "She swore like a trooper, stank, and spat when she spoke." And Stehlin described her as being pock-marked and having much too full a bosom. But Peter, who was certainly abnormal in his tastes, for some inscrutable reason found in this woman a companion to suit him. Just as he preferred the tiny Duchy of Holstein to the great Empire of Russia, he preferred this fat horror to his own glorious wife. The warm-

blooded, healthy Catherine could not understand this, but she realized that the Vorontzov represented a much greater danger than any Fräulein Karr, Korff or Shafirov. She was the niece of the Vice-Chancellor, and her aspirations reached far beyond those of remaining simply a King's mistress. There was frequent mention in Peter's intimate circle of "treading on the viper's head." Where the Russian throne was concerned, any deed of violence was possible. Catherine knew that Elizabeth Vorontzov cherished no less an ambition than to become Peter's lawful wife and Empress of Russia. Already it was quite clear that after Elizabeth's death the quarrel between husband and wife would assume momentous proportions.

The stage was set. In November, the Empress had another attack. An ominous calm reigned in her household. More than once when she expressed a wish to speak with some gentleman or other she was told that he was with the Grand Duke or the Grand Duchess. Each had their faction, their adherents in Russia and abroad. Catherine's party at the Court was the weaker—she stood or fell with Bestushev. Yet she did not fear Elizabeth's death: she knew, or rather felt in her bones, that beyond the self-seeking supporters of any political cause, beyond the walls of the palace hovered a dark, mysterious, and gigantic force—the people; and she knew instinctively, that this dark, mysterious force was on her side. It was this conviction which made her so sure of herself. She did not over-estimate her own strength, nor under-estimate that of her opponents; the only thing she underestimated was the tenacious hold on life of Elizabeth's sick body. The Empress was to live for several years longer, and Catherine was to endure many setbacks and trials before her education was complete and her power was put to the test.

Peter's impudent and open infatuation for Frederick caused no anxiety to anyone, not even to the Viennese ambassador, Count Esterhazy, but Catherine's quiet support of England never ceased to alarm the French government. That both husband and wife were open to corruption was well known at

the various Courts, and nobody took any particular exception to it. Maria Theresa concluded a Treaty with Peter, as the reigning Grand Duke of Holstein, whereby 100,000 gulden were guaranteed to him, on condition that his Holstein troops were kept at her disposal. It was quite obvious that these troops, with their Prussian training, Prussian uniforms, and Prussian sympathies would be entirely useless in a war against Prussia—but Maria Theresa believed that she had successfully bribed the insolvent Peter, and that in the event of any change of rulership which would make him Czar, she could count on his loyalty. Catherine was a more difficult case. In spite of Williams' dismissal, the suspicion persisted that English money was still finding its way by secret channels into Catherine's greedy pockets. Since France was, at that time, too poor to resort to counter bribery, the French tried to find some other method of inspiring the Russian Grand Duchess with "des sentiments convenables." It was known that Catherine was carrying on a correspondence with her mother, and as an entirely wrong impression was held both of Johanna Elizabeth's character and of her influence over her daughter, a French officer, the Marquis de Fraigne, was entrusted with the delicate mission of visiting the Princess von Zerbst and persuading her to use her maternal influence in the interests of the "good cause." Since Zerbst had declared itself neutral, the Marquis, dressed as a civilian, succeeded in travelling by way of Hamburg to the old castle, where he was enthusiastically welcomed. Ever since her efforts on Frederick's behalf, which had brought her so little gratitude or reward, and had exposed her to a great deal of embarrassment, the Princess's enthusiasm for the Prussian King had shown a marked cooling-off. She was now completely the mother of the Russian Grand Duchess, she received a large income from the Empress, and France was one of the powers in alliance with Russia; moreover, De Fraigne was an agreeable companion, and Zerbst was still as boring as it had always been. She was delighted to know that in Paris, at Versailles, her name was being associated with political intrigues, and impetuous as ever when she felt herself to be the central figure of any situation, she sat

down and wrote a long letter to her daughter, which, however, never reached Catherine, but most probably fell into Frederick's hands. In any case, Frederick learned of the presence of a French officer at Zerbst and gave orders for the immediate arrest of the suspicious stranger.

Prince Henry of Prussia had to negotiate for fully twenty-four hours with the reigning Prince of Zerbst, Catherine's brother Fritz, before De Fraigne was handed over, but in the end the neutrality of Zerbst proved a poor argument against the cannons which were trained on the old castle walls. To save his host, De Fraigne allowed himself to be arrested (it took Catherine five years to secure his release—she finally obtained it in 1763, when she was already Empress of Russia) and a fine of a hundred thousand ducats was imposed on the Principality of Zerbst as a punishment for having harboured a French officer when in a state of declared neutrality. Johanna Elizabeth fled to Hamburg to the house of the French consul, Champeaux, but Fritz enlisted in the Austrian army and, son of the faithful vassal Christian August, fought against Frederick. In Hamburg, Johanna Elizabeth experienced a final, late flowering of love: Champeaux's nephew became her lover and with him she went to Paris, where at last she was able to live the life of which she had dreamed for nearly half a century. Louis XV gave a ceremonious welcome to the relative of one of his most powerful allies; she lived in a palatial house, kept a large staff of servants, attended all entertainments and theatrical performances, and within two years had run up debts amounting to half a million francs.

The flight of the royal family from Zerbst, the imprisonment of De Fraigne, the belated fulfilment of Johanna's dreams—all these were the direct result of French efforts to divert Catherine's allegiance from England. Catherine herself knew nothing of these efforts. While the Princess was still meditating in Hamburg how she might instil some common sense into her obstinate daughter, the French party in Petersburg had found a far more effective means of short-circuiting the disturbing political activities of the Grand Duchess.

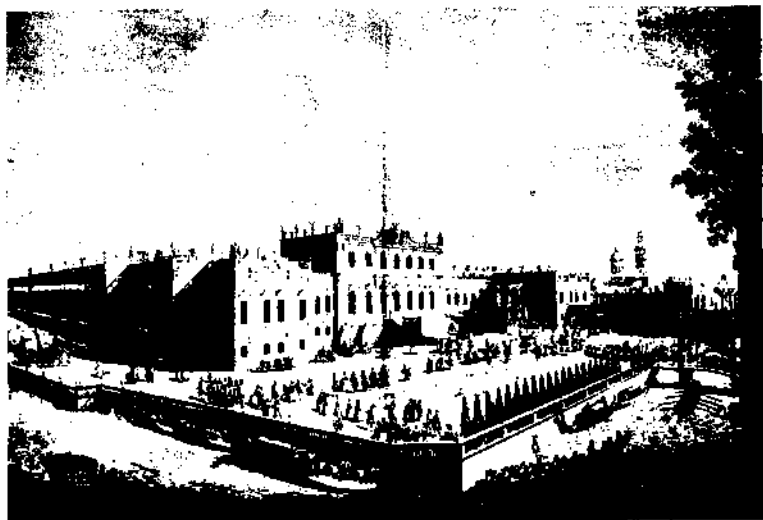
The first thing that happened was a message from l'Hôpital

informing the Vice-Chancellor Vorontzov that he had received instructions from his government in future to deal only with Chancellor Bestushev as sole plenipotentiary of the Russian Government. Vorontzov's vanity was cut to the quick, and his hatred of Bestushev was fanned to a white heat. The Shuvalovs were hand in glove with l'Hôpital, and the object of this move was to rouse the Empress from her lethargy and force her to take active steps against Bestushev. Elizabeth had never liked Bestushev; his dry, pedantic manner had always been abhorrent to her imaginative temperament. But he was a legacy from her idolized father, she had grown to rely on him and had fallen into the habit of leaving him to attend to all the boring business of government. The careless Rasumovsky had not been jealous of this arrangement, and the ambitious Shuvalovs had been unable to persuade the lazy, unbusinesslike Empress to make any changes in the government. Now she was suddenly beset on all sides; it was a concentrated and well-considered attack. Elizabeth was assured that it was common knowledge in Vienna and Versailles that Bestushev was sold to the English king, an exact figure was even named—twelve thousand ducats a year. She was told that letters from Catherine to Apraxin had passed through Bestushev's hands and the names of people who professed to have seen these letters were mentioned. Elizabeth, who had emptied her coffers and sacrificed her soldiers to fulfil her obligations as an ally, was deeply incensed at the thought that the Allies should feel they had been betrayed by the corruptibility of her generals and ministers, and by the treacherous machinations of the young Court. Alexander Shuvalov was sent to Narva to interview Apraxin, who swore that Catherine had never asked him to do anything which would run counter to the Empress's commands, but was forced to admit that he had received letters from her, and to produce the letters. Their contents were quite harmless; still, the fact remained that the Grand Duchess had been strictly forbidden to carry on any form of political correspondence, that she had ignored this order and that Bestushev had abetted her. If two unimportant letters had been found, why should not others of a

more dangerous character have been written and either destroyed or hidden? And why, in any case, was Catherine interfering in matters concerning the Crown? The autocratic old Empress's indignation had been roused, and she was given no further peace. It was pointed out that the young Court had been going its own way for a long time past, flouting the wishes of the Empress. Was not Poniatovsky staying on in Petersburg against Elizabeth's express command, simply because Catherine wanted him, and Bestushev preferred to obey her rather than his monarch? Had not the Polish minister, Stamke, received the Polish order of the White Eagle without Elizabeth's sanction, at Peter's request and through the agency of Bestushev? Was not everybody running to the young Court to flatter the rulers of to-morrow, and neglecting the Empress?

So far it seemed as if this was a conspiracy against Bestushev, coupled with accusations against the young Court. Then one day the Grand Duke visited his aunt, implored her forgiveness for his bad behaviour, and confessed that he had been sent by Bestushev. The matter now assumed a very different aspect; Peter was in the plot and it was aimed only indirectly against the Chancellor. The real enemy was Catherine. Her rivals were conspiring to anticipate the struggle for supremacy between husband and wife, so that before it was too late, before Elizabeth was dead and Catherine had an opportunity of appealing to public sympathy, they might brand her as a traitor and make her for ever unacceptable. Elizabeth was assured that she had only to arrest Bestushev and have his papers examined to find documents which would prove the Chancellor's complicity with the Grand Duchess even on the question of the succession.

At a court where there are as many spies as there are courtiers, there can be no secrets. No sooner had his enemies got wind of his future plans than Bestushev was informed of the plot against him. He pretended to be ill, received visitors unshaven and in his nightshirt, contorting his features as if he were in great pain, and when on the 8th of January he was requested to attend a meeting of the Conference, he excused himself on the pretext of illness. Elizabeth merely regarded this as a



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display of insubordination, she commanded him to appear, and when he entered the Conference Hall he was arrested.

This happened at the Winter Palace in the late afternoon. Though Catherine was living in the house, she heard nothing of Bestushev's arrest that day. It was not till the next morning, while she was dressing, that Vladyslava was able to give her a note from Poniatovsky: "There are always ways and means. Bestushev was arrested yesterday and deprived of all his offices and honours; your jeweller, Bernardi, has also been arrested, as well as Yelagin and Adadurov."

This was a terrible piece of news. The longer Catherine meditated on it and the consequences, the more alarming and hopeless her position seemed to grow. Bestushev's arrest in itself signified a victory for her enemies. They only needed one thing more to complete their triumph, and this they could now set about discovering quite calmly, Shuvalov's sharp eyes would doubtless find it in Bestushev's writing-table—those compromising letters in Catherine's hand which would betray the part she had played in engineering Poniatovsky's stay in Russia, her relations with Williams, her opinion of Elizabeth and the Grand Duke, and worst of all, the plan concerning the succession. If all this came to light—and what chance had it of escaping the Grand Inquisitor?—it would mean the end only of her dreams of the Russian Crown, but an end to freedom and perhaps even to life itself. In this terrible situation Catherine had no Bestushev to advise and support her. "There are always ways and means," Poniatovsky had written, but Poniatovsky, without Bestushev was as helpless as Catherine herself.

If, during the last few months, she had lost a little of her tact and even her judgment through a false sense of confidence, in this moment of supreme danger she proved herself magnificently equal to the situation. In a flash she regained all her old mastery. The wedding of her friend, Leo Narychkin, was to take place on this particular evening. Catherine dressed herself in festive attire, went to Mass, to the supper, and to the ball. No one mentioned the arrests, no one appeared to know anything

about them. The Grand Duke, however, was in remarkably high spirits and conspicuously avoided his wife. He was hoping she would be banished and that he would then be able to marry Elizabeth Vorontzov. Catherine was gay, she moved among the guests, talking, smiling, and apparently unsuspecting. When she reached Count Trubetsky, who together with Shuvalov was to hold the inquiry into the case of Bestushev, she paused. She loudly admired the pretty ribbons that hung from his marshal's baton, and then added in a whisper: "What are these charming things I hear? Which have you more of—criminals or crimes?" The old man, taken aback by her frankness, stammered: "We have obeyed our instructions. Bestushev has been arrested and now we are looking for reasons for his arrest."

Catherine could not doubt that these reasons would be found, but she remained to the end of the ball and managed to conceal the torment of anxiety that raged behind her smooth, calm brow. Not till the following morning did she receive a note from Bestushev: "Do not be alarmed. I found time to burn everything." That was heartening news. The most incriminating evidence had been destroyed, it remained to be seen what her enemies could make of such evidence as they already had—her relationship with Poniatovsky, and her correspondence with Apraxin. Gradually the Grand Duchess found herself deserted. No one dared visit her, the same people who yesterday had regarded her as their future ruler, knew that to-day she was under suspicion and that to-morrow she might be an outcast. She herself summoned no one for fear of bringing misfortune on her friends, also perhaps because she feared a painful refusal. In public, she avoided people—and no one came near her. "The Grand Duchess has fallen considerably in the general estimation," l'Hôpital reported to Paris. A similar despatch was sent to the French Consul in Hamburg, and was seen by the Princess of Zerbst, who, for the first time in her life, wrote a really genuine and heartfelt letter to her daughter, entreating her to throw herself at Elizabeth's feet and humbly implore her forgiveness. This letter never reached Catherine, but in any case she would hardly have followed her mother's advice. It

was not pride that kept her from asking Elizabeth's forgiveness, but the certain knowledge that such behaviour would be tantamount to an admission of guilt. She had done a great many things that could not fail to annoy Elizabeth, but she had done nothing against the interests of Russia. Her love for Russia was genuine. In this respect, she not only felt herself to be blameless, she was convinced that she and Bestushev were Russia's most loyal patriots, and that outside the Court and its camarilla the entire nation was on her side. The people had murmured angrily when Bestushev was led from the Conference Hall to his own house under an escort. The people had asked why it was not the Shuvalovs, those heartless exploiters, who had been arrested.

It was quite possible that Bestushev had taken money from the English, it was indeed probable, for how could a man living in the most corrupt country in the world further his own cause without having adequate funds at his disposal? But the Shuvalovs had no less than five monopolies, they had ground their immense fortune out of their own people. If it pleased the English King to send pounds and ducats to Russia, the rank and file of the population saw no reason to complain, but it infuriated them to have to pay tribute to the Shuvalovs for every sack of salt, every pipeful of tobacco, and every piece of tunny fish. Catherine knew all this, and though for the moment her enemies held the upper hand at Court, and the struggle might well seem hopeless, she accepted the challenge.

She had a valet named Shkurin. In the days of Madame Tchoglovkov he had acted as a spy for that lady, and one day Catherine had caught him and given him a sound box on the ears. This Russian method of treatment had worked wonders; from that day on Shkurin had become the most reliable and devoted of her servants. One of his friends had been set to guard the arrested jeweller, Bernardi, and he also knew a little bugler in the service of Bestushev who still had free access to the Chancellor's house. With the help of Shkurin and his friends Catherine corresponded with the prisoners, and so was able to avert the greatest danger of all, that of the accused per-

sons involving themselves by making contradictory statements. Under Shkurin's eyes she burnt all her papers, even her account books and the little essay, *Portrait of a Fifteen Year Old Philosopher*, which she had written for Gyllenborg. "If anyone asks you for my papers," she said to Shkurin, "you can swear by the Cross that you saw me burn them all, without a single exception."

Soon something happened which made her position still worse; the little bugler was arrested, because a letter from Poniatovsky to Bestushev had been found in his possession. The contents of the note were innocent enough, but it was addressed to a prisoner of state. The Ministry once more sent an explicit demand to the King of Poland for Poniatovsky's recall. Catherine was powerless to do anything. Even the last desperate resort of asking Peter to intervene was cut off from her. Since Bestushev's arrest Peter had not addressed a single word to her, he had not entered her room, had not even asked her advice as it was his custom to do when he was in difficulties. He had promptly gone over to the enemies' camp, and had even made some disgraceful concessions in the process. The slavish disciple of Frederick II, who had always referred to the French ambassador as "that harlequin," visited l'Hôpital on the day after Bestushev's arrest, and said to him: "What a pity that your friend De la Chétardie did not live to see this day!"

Vorontzov was now Grand Chancellor. He already saw Catherine driven from the country and his niece beside Peter on the throne of Russia. This plan, however, did not suit the Shuvalovs, who were jealous for their own power. The Shuvalovs' idea was, after Elizabeth's death, to send the whole Grand Ducal family, including the child Paul Petrovitch back to Holstein, to free the imprisoned Ivan from his fortress and, as his deliverers, become themselves the masters of Russia. The new men of power were at loggerheads regarding the future except on one point—that Catherine was played out. Those who previously had been careful to hide their malice from her, now showed their dislike quite openly.

On the 28th of February, Poniatovsky invited Catherine to

the Court theatre to witness a performance by the Russian Players. Apart from wishing to see the woman he loved, if only from a distance, he wanted the world at large to see her in order to silence the rumour that she had already been repudiated and sent home. She accepted the invitation and ordered her carriage for that evening. Soon after she had given the order, Alexander Shuvalov appeared and informed her that her intention of visiting the theatre was displeasing to the Grand Duke. She knew quite well why. If she went out, her ladies would have to accompany her, and Peter would then be deprived of the pleasure of taking supper with them and, in particular, of Elizabeth Vorontzov's company. Latterly, since she had not been in the habit of going out, Catherine had willingly allowed him this pleasure, but it was important that she should go to the theatre on this particular evening. She insisted on having her own way, and Peter insisted on having his. He even came to her room and made a scene; high words were exchanged, but neither was able to shake the determination of the other. Shortly before the performance was due to begin, Catherine sent a message to Shuvalov to ask if her carriage was ready. He came and informed her that the Grand Duke had forbidden her to have the carriage. She was furious, but secretly pleased that the accumulated resentment of the past weeks could at last be released.

"Very well, I shall go on foot," she replied, "and if my ladies and gentlemen are forbidden to accompany me, then I shall go alone. But, in any case, I shall immediately send a written complaint to the Empress."

Shuvalov blinked in his nervous way, and asked: "What will you say to Her Majesty?"

"I shall write and tell the Empress how I am being treated. I shall write and tell her that you encourage meetings between the Grand Duke and my ladies-in-waiting, and for this reason try to prevent me from going to the theatre, where I should have the pleasure of seeing Her Majesty. But apart from that, I shall ask the Empress to send me back to my mother. I am tired of sitting alone in my room and bringing misfortune on everyone who visits me. I shall inform the Empress of all

this and we will see whether you have the courage to refuse to deliver my letter."

Shuvalov, like most people, had never known Catherine in any but a mild mood. Her outburst made a deep impression on him and he withdrew in silence. Catherine immediately sat down and began a letter in Russian. Far from being worded in the haughty tone she had indicated to Shuvalov, it was couched in the most moving and emotional phrases she could invent. She thanked Elizabeth for all the kindness she had shown her, regretted that she had fallen from grace and begged, in the interests of her impaired health, to be allowed to return to her mother. "As for my children, I hardly ever see them though I live under the same roof. It is, therefore, all the same whether I live in the house or at a distance of a few thousand versts from them. I know that Your Majesty cares infinitely better for my children than I with my limited capacities could possibly do. I shall spend the rest of my days with my parents, praying fervently for Your Majesty, for my children, for the Grand Duke, and for all those who have done me either good or ill."

She made none of the complaints with which she had threatened Shuvalov, but the threat alone had sufficed. When she sent for him he informed her that the carriage was waiting. She handed him the letter and said that she released from their duty any of the ladies who did not wish to accompany her. When she passed through the anteroom where the Grand Duke, as usual, was playing cards with the Vorontzov, he rose to his feet, a habit which he had neglected lately. He bowed, and Catherine replied with a deep curtsy. When she returned from the theatre, Shuvalov informed her that the Empress would be pleased to grant her an interview.

This was precisely what she had hoped for. She was firmly convinced that the Shuvalovs, the Vorontzovs, and the Grand Duke were plotting to have her sent home in disgrace and humiliation, and she was just as firmly convinced that the best way of circumventing this intrigue was to take the bull by the horns and herself ask to return. Elizabeth, who shrank

from committing herself, and who was extremely sensitive about the reputation of her Court abroad, Elizabeth, tired and ill as she was, would instinctively baulk at this sudden request, and begin to find reasons for refusing it. Moreover, Catherine was confident of her superiority over the Empress in argument.

But she had to wait a long time for the promised interview. Days, weeks slipped by and no word came from Elizabeth. Meanwhile Catherine knew perfectly well that her enemies were searching indefatigably for some definite charge to bring against her. Bestushev was questioned daily, his papers ransacked, but all in vain. He had put his affairs in perfect order before he was arrested, and not a single line in Catherine's handwriting was found. As far as his statements went—unless these were to be judged as pure gallantries—it was obvious that in spite of everything he still believed in a future for Catherine, and consequently for himself; he did not betray her by a single word. When he was asked why he had kept Poniatovsky in Russia against Elizabeth's wishes, he replied: "It is true I used my influence to keep Poniatovsky here. I knew that Count Esterhazy and the Marquis de l'Hôpital were conspiring against me and I wished to have at least one minister at Court who was favourably disposed toward me. I beg Her Majesty's forgiveness for having placed my own interests above her supreme wish." The arrest of the Grand Chancellor, which had caused a stir both in and outside Russia, was threatening to become a catastrophe. In the hope of stumbling on some useful evidence, or possibly merely to gain time, letters were sent to the Secret Chancelleries in Vienna and Paris asking for copies of all Bestushev's despatches, but the foreign officials refused to comply with a request which entailed so much trouble and might be the cause of a great deal of unpleasantness for themselves.

Catherine heard nothing of what was taking place at the inquiry. She only knew that not a corner or cranny, not the most cleverly devised hiding-place in Bestushev's house, would escape the keen eyes of the "Grand Inquisitor." The signs of Imperial disfavour grew more marked, the attitude of the

Court grew colder and colder. One day Vladyslava was arrested. Catherine burst into tears. "Do not imagine," she said, "that you will learn anything from this woman. It is useless to persecute all my people, for I have given my confidence to no one!" She told her ladies, and bade them repeat her words to everyone, that if she was given an unpleasant person in the place of Vladyslava, that person might expect the worst possible treatment, even physical violence. She still refused to appear helpless, humble, or contrite, but actually her iron nerves were being worn to shreds by these weeks of waiting, by the obstinate, impenetrable silence of the Empress, by the unaccustomed and cruel loneliness. This was not the solitude that helped one to find solace in the philosophers and one's faith in a better future. Was there any future for her? That was the question. Anything would have been easier to bear than this agony of suspense. Catherine knew that she must force an issue somehow, whatever the cost.

One night between two and three in the morning she rang the alarm bell for her chamber-maid. In a faint voice she murmured that she was dying and asked for her Confessor. Instead of the Confessor there appeared first Shuvalov, then two doctors who felt her pulse, shook their heads, and as usual prescribed bleeding. "My body requires no further help," Catherine whispered in great agitation, "my soul is in danger." They could no longer refuse her a Confessor and at last he was called. The man was no fool. He grasped the position immediately and, being well disposed toward Catherine, as were all the clergy, after a two hours' conversation in which very little was said about the welfare of her soul, he promised to intercede with the Empress on her behalf. Meanwhile dawn had broken, the hour at which Elizabeth habitually retired to bed. The holy man was therefore obliged to wait until she had woken from her restless, feverish sleep before he could tell her that the Grand Duchess would undoubtedly die of grief and sorrow if the Empress did not find some way of comforting her. Elizabeth could not remain deaf to such an appeal; that evening she sent a message to Catherine telling

her that she would be summoned to an interview during the course of the night.

At ten o'clock Catherine made her toilet, then lay down fully dressed on the sofa and slept until Shuvalov came to lead her to the Empress. Why was she not pacing restlessly up and down the room, rehearsing questions and answers, weighing and choosing her words? Her composure after the nervous strain of the past weeks and before the fatal interview was strange; so far she had gained no more than a prisoner on remand whose patience is exhausted and who has succeeded in hastening the date of his trial. Her accusers and judges were far more agitated than she was. While Catherine slept, Elizabeth was making elaborate preparations. She had screens brought to her room and concealed Ivan Shuvalov behind them; she sent for Apraxin's letters, the only tangible evidence against Catherine, and put them in her gold wash-basin. The Grand Duke, anxious to see his wife condemned and fearful of leaving her alone with the Empress, hovered impatiently on the threshold of his room, so as to be able to enter Elizabeth's presence at the same moment as she did. What was it they all feared from the lonely, defenceless Catherine? They feared that which enabled her to sleep peacefully: the strength of her personality. Sleep such as this comes to great generals before a decisive battle, to charmed brawlers before a duel to the death.

At half-past one Alexander Shuvalov came and roused her. They walked through the sleeping palace, which was, however, not as quiet as usual at this hour; the night watchmen were less gruff and sleepy, more than one inquisitive pair of eyes was peeping through a keyhole or from behind curtains to catch a glimpse of the expression, gait, and bearing of the Grand Duchess who was going to her doom. Catherine's heart was beating wildly now, and she was glad of it; she did not want to confront Elizabeth with cold arguments, to pursue an endless and barren discussion of right and wrong; she wanted to be able to move her.

When she entered Elizabeth's room, she found the Grand Duke already in attendance. As soon as she saw the Empress

she threw herself at her feet and begged with tears in her eyes to be allowed to return to her own people. Elizabeth tried to raise her from the floor. Her towering anger evaporated. Catherine's request to leave Russia for good raised a whole mass of complications which the sick, tired woman felt herself incapable of facing, just as she had shrunk from facing them six weeks before when Catherine made the same request in a letter.

"How can you wish me to send you away? Do you not remember that you have children?" she demanded.

"My children are in your hands and could not be better cared for. I hope that you will not abandon them."

"But what reason shall I give the world, if I send you away?"

"Your Majesty will, if you consider it right, inform the world of the reasons why I have earned your disfavour and the hatred of the Grand Duke."

Elizabeth's brow became more and more troubled: tell the world the very thing which at all costs she wished to hide from it! "And on what will you live with your relations?"

"What I lived on before you did me the honour to summon me to Russia."

"Your mother is a fugitive. She has been obliged to leave her country, and has gone to Paris."

"I know. My mother was devoted to the interests of Russia, and thus brought the anger of the King of Prussia upon herself."

It was an unanswerable argument. For the second time Elizabeth told Catherine to rise to her feet, then she began to pace the room thoughtfully. The first passage of arms was over. Catherine had discovered that Elizabeth did not want to send her away. But what was Elizabeth thinking as she walked from one end to the other of the vast apartment? Suddenly she turned on Catherine:

"God is witness of the bitter tears I shed when you fell ill after your arrival in Russia. If I had not loved you I would not have kept you here."

These were not angry words, this was no accusation. Why

should Elizabeth recall the time when she had been in fear and anxiety for Catherine's life? Once again, after years of enmity, in a moment of blackest suspicion, Elizabeth's deep and indestructible love for Catherine broke through the accumulated anger of an Empress for a disobedient subject, through the hatred of an ageing woman for a young one, snapped the seven iron chains with which she had thought to protect her heart, and made her weak. She searched her memory in vain for the accusations against Catherine with which her household had been feeding her for months. What she managed to say could not stand up against the challenge of Catherine's clear gaze.

"You are extremely proud. You think that no one alive is so clever as yourself!"

"If I thought that, nothing would be more likely to cure me of my belief than my present situation."

Throughout this conversation the Grand Duke had been whispering with Alexander Shuvalov. Catherine, half listening to their whispered talk, caught the words: "She is terribly malicious and obstinate."

She was anxious that whatever discussion she might have with Peter should take place before the Empress. She turned to him and said: "If you are speaking of me, then it is with pleasure that I tell you in the presence of Her Majesty that I am certainly ill-disposed toward those who advise you to act unwisely, and that if I have become obstinate it is only because I have found that my kindness earns me your hatred."

Peter turned to the Empress: "Your Majesty can hear for yourself from her words how malicious she is."

But Elizabeth was occupied with her own thoughts. What was her quarrel with Catherine? Why had all her friends advised her to cross-examine the Grand Duchess with the utmost severity?

"You interfere in matters which do not concern you. How, for example, could you have the audacity to send instructions to General Apraxin?"

"I? It never once entered my head to send him instructions."

"What? Can you deny that you wrote to him? Your letters are here, in this basin. You know that you are forbidden to write letters."

Now they had come to the real point. "It is true that I disobeyed this order and I beg your forgiveness. But since my letters are here they will prove to Your Majesty that I never sent him instructions, but merely begged him to carry out Your Majesty's commands."

"Bestushev says that there were many more letters."

"If Bestushev says that, he lies."

"Good, if he lies about you, he shall be put to torture."

"Your Majesty has the power to do whatever you think good. Nevertheless it is true that I have only written these two letters."

Elizabeth was at the end of her resources. She had nothing more to bring against Catherine. Her counsellors had misled her into believing that she was a traitor and that Bestushev was a traitor, and she owed it to the Allies to sift the matter to the bottom. But nothing whatever had come to light. Catherine stood before her strong and calm, a picture of offended, maligned innocence. It was possible that in spite of everything she was guilty and a traitor—who could know? Elizabeth was too tired, too weak to go on, she was no match for this healthy young woman, with her clear eyes refreshed by sleep.

Meanwhile the infuriated Grand Duke was screaming at his wife. He was disclosing all the unsavoury details of their wretched life together. This was not news to Elizabeth. She knew that Catherine was no angel, but she was also aware that her Court was not a forcing-house for virtue. And when Catherine replied to these insulting accusations with calm and reasonable arguments, Elizabeth, who was herself no angel, felt irresistibly drawn to this dignified creature who seemed to radiate strength and purpose. In his excitement Peter's voice grew shrill and hurt her ears. Peter was a fool. He never knew what the real point of any argument was. Elizabeth was not as clever as Catherine, her erratic impulses had hampered the development of her intellect, but she had a very

sound instinct and could always grasp the essentials of any vital argument. Now she suddenly came close to Catherine and said:

"I have had a great deal more to say to you, but I do not care to talk here. I do not wish to bring any more unhappiness upon you."

Catherine understood. In her heart, too, all the bitterness of the past few weeks had evaporated. She gladly forgot that she had come as an accuser to be accused, and whispered back in a voice full of emotion:

"I too cannot say all that I want to here, though I have a burning desire to open my heart and soul to you."

Real tears of feeling stood in the eyes of both women. What had happened? The piled-up accusations of the Shuvalovs and the Vorontzovs had melted to nothing in this atmosphere of straightforward candour. Catherine had been given almost no chance to defend herself, but she had stood up to Elizabeth and that moreover in the presence of her three worst enemies, one of whom, hiding behind the screen, was Elizabeth's lover. In order to conceal the full extent of her weakness from these three, Elizabeth dismissed the whole company.

On the following day everyone was able to hear from Elizabeth's own lips that her nephew was a simpleton, and Catherine was a very clever woman. A few days later she sent for Catherine a second time, but we knew nothing of what happened at this interview; Catherine's *Memoirs* break off at the point when she entered Elizabeth's room, where, this time, there were no screens and no concealed witnesses. But there is a letter written by Catherine to Elizabeth immediately afterwards, on the day before her departure to Oranienbaum, in which she says: "When I recall the friendly words which it was my privilege to hear from your Imperial Majesty's gracious lips, tears of joy spring to my eyes."

No further mention of being sent home, of banishment and disgrace, was heard. On the twenty-first of April, Catherine's

birthday, Elizabeth sent word to her that she had drunk her health, and gave her permission to come once a week to Peterhof to visit her children. From this time on she never uttered a harsh word concerning the Grand Duchess, yet there could be no question of a real friendship between the two women. Elizabeth had entered upon those dangerous years whose destructive forces only the finest minds and hearts can resist, but Elizabeth had frittered away her powers of resistance, her fires were burnt out, the outstanding qualities of her rich nature had been sacrificed to the demon of vanity; now she herself was a sacrifice to that demon, and her declining years were spent in mourning the happiness she had lost forever. She could not bear to see her young and radiant successor too often.

Catherine made this easy for her. On the pretext of taking a water cure she occupied a remote pavilion at Oranienbaum and lived in retirement. She took no part in the gaities of Peterhof, although the cloud of disgrace had lifted from her. Her former enemies were once more competing for her favour. The ambitious dream of Elizabeth Vorontzov had been shattered, she had to content herself with the rôle of a future Pompadour, and was only too thankful to win a kind word from the proud lips of the Grand Duchess. Even the French were intimidated and tried to repair the damage caused by their unsuccessful machinations. Between them the Russian and French Governments agreed to pay off the debts of Catherine's brother, the Prince of Zerbst.

However, once the inquiries had been begun they had to be carried through, though it was quite obvious that they would be fruitless and no one wished for further results. When a General and a Grand Chancellor have been arrested, they cannot suddenly be set free again like a couple of tramps. Apraxin's trial began a year after his arrest. The unfortunate man fell dead on the very first day because, so it was said, he had not waited to hear the end of the sentence the judge was speaking: "And there now remains no course but to——." At this point the great, fat, apoplectic Apraxin fell dead to the

ground. He had expected the words: "torture them" to follow—whereas the sentence ended "set them free."

The inquiry against Bestushev also lasted a full year and resulted in a verdict of guilty on the charge of *lèse Majesté*. "The perfidious minister," ran the manifesto to the nation, "has, in a blind effort to make himself important, endeavoured to prejudice Her Majesty against her dear nephew, the heir to the throne, and against her dear niece, the Grand Duchess," for which crime he was deprived of his offices and honours and banished to one of his estates. The fact that they did not dare to confiscate his estates and his income is sufficient proof of how little real evidence there was against him. Since he, like Catherine, had burned all his papers, it will never be known whether he was unjustly banished, or whether he escaped a more just and severe punishment. The other prisoners were given equally mild sentences, and the result of the trial can only be described as a retreat in extreme disorder on the part of the prosecution.

Poniatovsky, though he had been officially recalled to Poland, remained in Petersburg near the woman he loved throughout the whole of this difficult time. He feigned sickness, spent the whole day in bed, but at night disguised himself in a blond peruke and went to Oranienbaum. If a guard or watchman challenged him with a "Who goes there?" he would reply: "One of the Grand Duke's musicians." Catherine received her lover every night in her lonely pavilion. Could there really have been a time when the young Pole feared the danger of becoming her lover? After three years of passionate intimacy, faced with an inevitable parting, he was ready to dare anything to see her just once more, and again once more. Either his love must have grown with the years or else Catherine had infected him with her own courage. Whichever it was, the rashness of these two lovers, who had already seen the abyss yawning under their feet, was almost beyond belief. When their love had thrown the whole of Europe into a ferment, had brought about the fall of Bestushev and almost resulted

in Catherine's own banishment, an incident took place which once again brought them within a hair's breadth of disaster and, though the disaster was averted, hastened the end of their romance.

One night as Poniatovsky was leaving Catherine's pavilion he was set upon by three horsemen in the park, seized by the collar like a thief and dragged before the Grand Duke. Peter pretended he thought his life was being threatened by this disguised intruder, and he may really have believed this. Brockdorff advised him loudly to make short shrift of the villain and kill him on the spot. Even in the face of mortal peril, Poniatovsky's honour, the honour of a Polish gentleman, demanded that he should keep silent. He made no attempt to reveal himself. His silence only enraged Peter. Such chivalry was so incomprehensible to him that he really began to suspect this silent man of murderous intentions. But for the intervention of Leo Narychkin, Poniatovsky would have been lost; eventually he was handed over to Alexander Shuvalov, who decided that it would be wisest to let the Polish ambassador go free and avoid any scandal. He, too, had begun to realize that it was wiser to keep on good terms with Catherine than to make things unpleasant for her.

But still the young man, who was completely wrapped up in his passion, could not make up his mind to leave the country. He cast about for some fresh subterfuge to see his beloved, and eventually hit upon an idea. At a dance at Peterhof he whispered to Elizabeth Vorontzov: "It would be an easy matter for you to make us all happy!" The Vorontzov immediately saw that here was the long-desired opportunity for placing the unapproachable Grand Duchess under an obligation to herself, and that very same night she took Poniatovsky to see Peter. "You must be the greatest of fools," Peter cried, "not to have taken me into your confidence from the start! Had I realized what was on foot, you would have been spared all this embarrassment." Poniatovsky kept his head. Instead of complaining of the annoyances to which he had been subjected, he praised the perfect discipline

of the Holstein guards. In this way he flattered Peter's susceptible vanity, the Grand Duke's temper improved, and a bottle of wine did the rest. Suddenly a mad idea seized hold of him and brought him to his feet in a flash. He rushed to Catherine's room, wakened her, forced her to throw a loose robe over her nightdress, and without giving her time even to put on shoes and stockings dragged her with only a pair of slippers on her bare feet into the presence of Poniatovsky and the Vorontzov, crying: "Well, here she is. Now, I think, you should be satisfied with me!"

No one was more satisfied than Peter. It was his moment of triumph, the climax of his marriage, the final fulfilment of his dream-wish. From the very first day of his marriage he had tried to humiliate his wife, who was so superior to himself in every respect, and he had set about doing this in two ways: first by betraying her with other women, and then by conniving at her intrigues with other men. Now at last the moment had come when, with his mistress on his arm, he could smile at Catherine and her lover. He was completely master of the situation. He caused a repetition of it by inviting Poniatovsky to Oranienbaum and receiving him in the presence of both Catherine and the Vorontzov. When after a supper *d quatre*, he said: "Now, children, I think you no longer wish for our company," and retired gleefully with his mistress, he was not conscious of being a cuckold, but rather for the first time in his life felt an equal and even a superior being. His complaisance was genuine enough; it sprang from no ulterior motives, but from a downright disdain for marriage. Poniatovsky no longer needed to wear a blond peruke, he had nothing more to fear from Peter's guards.

The situation was an unbearable one for Catherine; she had been ready to engage in the most dangerous escapades, but she was horrified at the thought of submitting herself to the mercy of the gossip-loving Grand Duke and the good will of his malicious mistress. She was not cynical, like Peter; she was extremely romantic. The thing which pleased Peter most, the degrading of love to libertinage, offended her sensibilities.

She could not bear that Peter should consider Poniatovsky merely as her equivalent of the Vorontzov. She regarded Poniatovsky as her one great love—she had known no other. She would have loved Peter or Saltykov in exactly the same way, if Peter had been lovable or Saltykov faithful.

The thing she found most unbearable was this new camaraderie, this degrading friendship based on their mutual adultery. With her infallible instinct for recognizing the consequences of most human actions, she realized that this reconciliation spelled a greater danger to her future than all the machinations of her enemies. Her ambition could permit no common bond between herself and Peter, and even though Peter was perfectly willing to write to the King of Poland and ask that Poniatovsky's credentials should be renewed, she preferred to let her lover go, convinced that their robust passion would outlive Peter's morbid passion, and that after Elizabeth's death, she—Catherine—would have the power to summon to her side whoever she wished and on her own terms.

Her correspondence with Poniatovsky was as tender as that of a betrothed pair, full of confident hope for a speedy and permanent reunion.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE DIE IS CAST

ABOUT this time—the summer of 1759—the boy, Paul Petrovitch, was handed over to the charge of a new tutor, Count Nikita Panin.

Years ago when Elizabeth, wearying of her old favourite, Rasumovsky, had cast her eyes about for a new protégé, they had fallen approvingly on the twenty-nine-year-old Panin. Russian Court gossip had it that the young man succeeded in penetrating as far as the Empress's bathroom, but there had the misfortune to fall asleep and so missed the moment for which the Empress had timed his entrance. Whether the story is true or not, he certainly lost the best appointment in the country, and the Shuvalovs triumphed. But, fearing that this handsome youth might be given a second chance of which he would make better use, they saw to it that he received an honourable appointment at a safe distance from the Court—first as ambassador in Copenhagen, and later in Stockholm. In both cities he did credit to his country, for he was neither a barbarian nor an ape of foreign customs, but a cultured Russian with an agreeably nonchalant and reserved manner. He was a pupil of Bestushev.

He had made Bestushev's policy—the policy of Peter the Great—his own. He loved England and Austria, hated Prussia and France, and adhered to these principles throughout his term of office in Sweden. He disapproved of the new alliance with France, and when the Chancellor, Vorontzov, demanded that he should foster French interests in Stockholm, he showed himself less accommodating but more incorruptible than Williams, and handed in his resignation.

At this time he was forty-two, rather stout and even more

phlegmatic than in the days of his youth. The Shuvalovs no longer feared him and consented to his appointment as tutor to the child Paul, a post which brought him in close and constant touch with the Empress. And in truth there was nothing more to fear; Elizabeth was an extinct volcano.

Peter was not at all pleased with his son's new instructor. "Let the boy remain for the time being under his supervision—I shall soon take steps to provide for a more suitable military training in place of this womanish education." Panin, for his part, cared even less for the Grand Duke. How could this upright man, who valued his principles so highly, find anything to admire in Peter? Panin's hatred of Prussia was even greater than his hatred of France—and he knew that Peter not only worshipped Frederick, but rendered his idol very considerable services as a spy. Peter used the new English Ambassador, the Marquis of Keith, to convey not only repeated assurances of his boundless devotion, but any valuable information that came his way to the Prussian king; courier upon courier travelled ostensibly to London but actually to Berlin, so that very often Frederick had news of the decisions of the Petersburg conferences even before they reached the commanders of the Russian army. All this was no secret; the Danish and French Ambassadors remonstrated with Vorontzov, but Vorontzov could not make up his mind to oppose the future Emperor. His niece, Elizabeth, was once more encouraging him, inflaming him with her ambitious plans: suppose, she whispered, that when the Empress died the secret of little Paul's illegitimate birth were revealed, and a divorce obtained on the grounds of adultery? Then she, Elizabeth, might yet become Empress, and her uncle the chief power in the land.

Panin was aware of the Vorontzovs' schemes and knew, too, what the Shuvalovs were planning. He, however, had a plan of his own, namely, to depose Peter and set his own pupil, little Paul, on the throne. But how bring this about? There was only one person in the world with whom he could discuss the project, and that was Catherine. She was dear to him because she had been dear to his friend and teacher, Bestushev,

and doubly dear because she herself had suffered for Bestushev and remained true to him to the last. Panin was a good judge of character, he knew that it was possible to discuss the most delicate matters with Catherine in perfect safety; she was discretion itself. He also realized that, while his plan was not altogether to her taste, it was preferable to the prospect of seeing Peter on the throne. "I would rather be the mother than the wife of the Emperor." That was true enough, but it was not the whole truth. She would rather have ruled as Empress herself. Panin was no sycophant and no hypocrite; Catherine knew quite well that she could count on him only until such time as Peter was dethroned—he admitted that openly.

But even this divided loyalty was valuable, far more valuable than the crude advances of Ivan Shuvalov, which caused the French Ambassador to write to Paris: "The favourite seems anxious to grace a twofold position, dangerous as this might appear." Ivan was in no danger of losing his head, since Catherine showed no signs of losing hers on his account. The Shuvalovs were, and remained, a suspicious pair; when they made a cautious attempt to discover through Panin what Catherine's attitude would be in the event of Peter's dethronement, that gentleman replied in Catherine's name: "There must be no tampering with that which for twenty years has been held sacred."

A year after Panin had been appointed as instructor to the child Paul—in the summer of 1760—Elizabeth Vorontzov's youngest sister arrived in Petersburg: "little Catherine," as she was later to be known, to distinguish her from the great Catherine. She was eighteen years old at this time, had been married three years before to Count Dashkov, and was the mother of two children. She had enjoyed no better an education than her fat, stupid sister, but even as a child she had shown a precocious taste for reading, and a preference for the heavy works of historians and philosophers. When Catherine met her for the first time at the house of her

uncle Vorontzov, she was amazed to find a fifteen-year-old Russian girl so exceptionally well-educated, and went out of her way to be gracious to this intelligent child who shared her own admiration for Montaigne and Voltaire. When Catherine was gracious she was quite irresistible, and the impression she made on the impulsive, headstrong girl was overwhelming. Her subsequent marriage to Dashkov and the birth of her two children could not efface it. She raved about Catherine like a schoolgirl, but like an intelligent schoolgirl: Catherine represented her ideal of philosophic enlightenment.

As soon as she arrived in Petersburg her sister and the Grand Duke made efforts to draw her into their circle. But the little Countess did not care for such society. Peter liked rough, military behaviour from his friends, the men were, of course, expected to smoke heavy pipes in the Prussian manner whether they liked them or not, and even the women adopted the habit in order to please the Grand Duke. Peter invariably referred to Frederick II as "the king, my master," and maintained an attitude of aloof disapproval toward the ideas of the French philosophers. He once started a campaign for the restoration of the death penalty: "To waive the death penalty is to encourage disobedience and all manner of disorder," said the future ruler of Russia, thereby convicting himself as an embryo tyrant in the eyes of Montesquieu's meek pupil. She might have forgiven him his despotism had he known how to plead his own case more skilfully, but what repelled her most in Peter and his circle of friends was their ignorance, and the fact that they boasted of this ignorance as a soldierly virtue.

As usual, Catherine showed herself in complete contrast to her husband. It is hardly possible to speak of the Grand Duchess's "circle" at this period, for she was a stubborn recluse and appeared in public only on state occasions. Every Sunday, however, she went to Peterhof to visit her children, and on the homeward journey she would often tell her coachman to stop at the Dashkovs' summer villa, and take the young Countess back to Oranienbaum to spend the rest of the day

with her. In Catherine's garden or in the seclusion of her apartments, the two women, one a little over thirty, the other not yet twenty, would talk for hours. Their conversation was of a highly intellectual nature, concerned with the practical application of philosophical theories, with the rights of man, humanitarianism, and democracy. The Dashkov maintained, with some pride and no little justification, that there could hardly have been a third woman in Russia capable of joining in their discussions. After these talks, she would drive home with her cheeks aflame, trembling as if in a fever. She visualized Peter's Russia, an enslaved military state in which the Prussian hangman added his services to those of the Russian knout, and then the Russia of Catherine's dreams, a Utopian state such as Montesquieu might have created, a constitutional monarchy in which the will of the liberated masses co-operated with the will of a wise and benevolent Empress for the common good.

Burning with this noble fire, she spent restless, wakeful nights, while her seething imagination conjured up the most fantastic pictures. Perhaps she was destined to become the saviour of her idolized friend, of Russia, and of humanity, all at the same time. There had been many revolutions in Russia in the past, but never one designed so exclusively for the benefit of the people, never a dream so truly patriotic as that of deposing Peter in favour of Catherine. Was it the monopoly of ambitious generals, of adventurers greedy for power, to create revolutions? Why should not a young woman, wholly dedicated to the cause of good, march at the head of a revolution for once in the history of Russia? The little Dashkov was firmly convinced that her motives were entirely disinterested; if vanity played as large a part as idealism in her dreams, she was totally unaware of it, and this artlessness gave her the naïve enthusiasm without which she would surely have come to grief when faced with practical problems. Her ambition was boundless, but it was directed solely to what she considered to be fine and noble ends. Catherine was the embodiment of all her ideals, and to be in the company of this flesh-and-

blood idol spelled her greatest happiness, one for which she was prepared to sacrifice everything, even the happiness of her own family.

So long as Elizabeth was still alive, the Dashkov was forced to restrict her activities. But she did not remain idle. She made use of her husband's position—and even more of her uncle's, the Chancellor Vorontzov, and that of her sister, the Grand Duke's mistress—to meet all the people of importance in the government, and her talks with them always had a bearing on her future plans. She assumed an air of ingenuous innocence (what need to pretend when she was only nineteen?) and no one dreamt there was anything to fear from this artless child. It was quite easy for her to discover, without betraying herself, the attitude of this and that member of the Senate or Assembly concerning Peter and Catherine. Quite unknown to them, she was busy making a list in her clever, determined little head of those who were to be her future confederates, allotting them the various rôles they were later to assume.

She never spoke openly to Catherine of these plans: Catherine would not have permitted it. The Grand Duchess looked on the Dashkov as an enchanting child, whose adoration was agreeably flattering and whose companionship she found stimulating. Incidentally she was able to pick up a great deal of useful information from this child. Catherine never had an intimate woman friend—her relations with the Dashkov were not those of real friendship, the young Countess was just an infatuated schoolgirl, whose worship she was willing to accept but not to take seriously.

In the autumn of 1758, soon after Poniatovsky's departure, someone intimately acquainted with Catherine is supposed to have said that only the French Government could bring about the young Pole's return. "Let them do so," Catherine is reported to have replied, "and I will become a Frenchwoman heart and soul." Whether it was true or not, the conversation was reported to l'Hôpital, who immediately passed it on to

his minister in Paris, the Duc de Choiseul. At that time Choiseul did not attach very much importance to Catherine.

In the summer of 1759 the English Navy won two very considerable victories, one at Le Havre, where a large number of convoy ships were destroyed, and the second as the French Mediterranean Fleet was sailing out of the Straits of Gibraltar. Choiseul instantly realized the gravity of these defeats and was anxious to discover, through diplomatic channels, on what conditions an honourable peace with England might be achieved. Since France's ally, Russia, was taking no part in the war, and was even represented in London in the person of Count Galitzin, Russia seemed the obvious mediator.

In this connection Catherine was an important person to be considered. She was on friendly terms with the English Ambassador in Petersburg, she was both intelligent and discreet; all that remained was to enlist her sympathy for the French cause. Choiseul remembered l'Hôpital's previous despatch, and thought it would be a good way of ingratiating his new envoy with Catherine, to send him bearing an assurance of Poniatovsky's speedy return to Russia. And yet, skilled and experienced psychologist that he was, he feared that disillusionment might follow a lovers' meeting after so long a separation. He thought of another and even better way of attaching Catherine to France: why should a young Frenchman not act as a substitute for a latinized Pole? While he was promising Catherine to restore Poniatovsky to her, he was looking about for a man capable of taking Poniatovsky's place in her heart. He believed he had found the right man in the twenty-seven-year-old Count Breteuil.

Catherine received Breteuil with great friendliness, and thanked him, and through him the King of France; for the efforts which were being made to bring Poniatovsky back to Russia. But Breteuil was disavowed by his king; it had come to the ears of Louis that the Empress Elizabeth disliked the young Pole and would on no account receive him a second time as Ambassador. Breteuil was instructed to convey this information to Catherine. He trembled at the prospect of this

second interview, expecting, not unreasonably, to encounter disappointment, coldness, and disfavour. To his surprise and relief Catherine remained totally unmoved, and replied that in spite of this temporary setback she was convinced of the goodwill of the French king, could understand the difficulties of the situation, and would remain eternally grateful for this proof of his friendship.

Quite unconsciously Breteuil had rendered the Grand Duchess a far greater service at this second interview than at the first. She was still carrying on a tender correspondence with Poniatovsky, but the last thing in the world she wanted was his return to Petersburg.

For quite recently she had found a successor to her Polish lover. He was a lieutenant of the Guards, and his name was Gregory Orlov.

The Orlovs boasted no exalted ancestry. Their grandfather had been a ranker in the Strelitz Regiment, and after an unsuccessful attempt at mutiny he, with a number of his comrades, had been sentenced to death. With his appetite for horrors, Peter the Great loved to witness wholesale executions and even to assist at them himself. When it came to Orlov's turn to lay his head on the block, this lusty soldier kicked aside the bloodstained head of a decapitated comrade, exclaiming: "I must make room for myself here!" Such coolness in the very face of death appealed to Peter; he spared Orlov's life, and put him into a regiment of the line, where in time he achieved the rank of an officer and with it that of a nobleman.

There were five grandsons of this robust and cynical hero now alive: five muscular, handsome brothers, all of them in the regiment of the Guards, popular with their brother officers, idolized by their subordinates as much for their vices as for their virtues, since a judicious mixture of these qualities constituted the ideal of a Russian officer at that period. They were all daring to the point of foolhardiness, of cheerful dispositions, genial with their friends, unrestrained in their passions, heavy drinkers, gamblers, lovers, and confirmed

fatalists. They knew how to live hotly and face death coolly; they were impulsive by nature, greedy but not calculating, generous to a degree, and entirely uneducated. Like cats, they seemed to be perpetually balancing on the edge of some precipice. Women love such men, but their fascination is also felt by the more primitive types of their own sex.

Gregory was the second and the most handsome of the brothers. He had "the head of an angel on the body of an athlete." He had distinguished himself by his singular courage at the frightful slaughter of Zorndorf, where, though he had been four times wounded, he did not stir from his post, and in recognition of his bravery he was made aide-de-camp to the Colonel, Peter Shuvalov. His heroism was, in point of fact, not of the heroic, popular brand; it was merely a manifestation of the traditional Orlov contempt for death, which needed no idealistic motive to spur it on to challenging destiny and danger. Gregory proved this quickly enough when he abducted his Colonel's mistress, the beautiful Countess Kurakin. This was a far more dangerous adventure than the battle of Zorndorf, but Gregory's lucky star was still watching over him. Shuvalov met with a sudden, unexpected death, and Gregory Orlov became overnight one of the most picturesque figures in Russia.

This escapade had taken place at Königsberg, and it was considered advisable to remove him from the neighbourhood. He was put in charge of Count Schwerin, who had been taken prisoner at the battle of Zorndorf, and went to Petersburg with him. It was an easy, really a nominal duty: courtesy to distinguished prisoners of war had always been a matter of traditional Russian pride, and Count Schwerin had no cause for complaint. He was treated as a "distinguished foreigner," lodged in a magnificent palace, came and went as he pleased, and was even received at Court. As a Prussian, he was naturally given a particularly warm welcome by Peter. "Were I Emperor, you would not be a prisoner of war," the Grand Duke said, and showed the Count a ring containing the portrait of Frederick II which he always wore on his finger.

Gregory Orlov had ample leisure to continue his wild career

in Petersburg, and to pursue his favourite sport of throwing out a challenge to fate. He chose the card-tables for the scene of the next encounter. Like his brothers he was an ardent and a reckless gambler: at one moment he had a thousand roubles in his pocket, the next moment he would be penniless; it was all the same to him whether he played with officers of rank or in the meanest gambling dens; when he won he threw his money about liberally, and when he lost he ran up debts. His brothers did precisely the same. Any dispassionate observer, not given to reading a man's fate in the stars, would have prophesied a disastrous end for them all.

Catherine first met Orlov when he was acting as escort officer to Count Schwerin. There is a story that one day when the Count was visiting Oranienbaum, as she stood at her window gazing in boredom down at the garden, her eyes met the impassioned gaze of Gregory Orlov. It cannot be doubted that the virile good looks of the young officer made an impression on her. And Orlov was no hesitant lover like Poniatovsky; he seized his opportunities as soon as he became aware of them. He bore little resemblance to Poniatovsky, but he shared certain qualities in common with Saltykov and with others who were to succeed him in Catherine's favour: he was, to put it baldly, the type of man she admired. It is surely no coincidence that all Catherine's lovers, with the exception of Poniatovsky, were men of Herculean build, handsome, broad-shouldered warrior giants, well-developed in body, under-developed in mind, tempestuous in their passions; men, in a word, whose common and conspicuous characteristic was their virility. It was because her lovers were of this type that Catherine earned the reputation of a modern Messalina, that her mental and physical preferences have been labelled incongruous, and that her posthumous image enshrined in the waxwork museum of semi-educated public opinion has been painted in such garish colours. This waxwork figure is an abominable hybrid, a creature with a masculine brain, a lecherous body, and no heart; a woman always striving for effect, incapable of going to bed by herself, who, in order to satisfy her purely

sensual desires, chose her lovers for their qualifications in this sphere of activity alone.

For the past hundred and fifty years, this monstrous picture has tickled the imagination of the middle classes. It is utterly false. Catherine was as tender and loving as any other woman of warm and natural desires. "The trouble is that my heart cannot bear to be one hour without love. People say that such longing only serves to conceal human vice—as if warm-heartedness must have a reason! Yet it may be that such a condition of the heart is rather a vice than a virtue." This may not be a particularly puritanical sentiment, but it is by no means an admission of unbridled voluptuousness. Catherine's guiding motive was not her love of masculine strength, but her inbred terror of masculine weakness. She could not forget what experience had taught her; her childhood had been overshadowed by her unavailing struggle against a weak and sickly brother, her marriage to a weak and sickly husband was merely a repetition, a never-ending variation of the same theme; every humiliation, every insult to her womanhood, had been inflicted on her by a weakling. A woman of exceptionally robust and healthy temperament may recover from the effect of nine year's nightly contempt and neglect—but she can never forget them. They had left their mark on Catherine, and that mark was fear—fear of a repetition of the humiliating experience. Catherine's love of masculine strength was simply the means her sane and well-balanced mind had devised to escape from a horror she dreaded. But because a strong vein of sentimentality ran in her nature, she was obliged to disguise this process of physical selection under a cloak of romanticism; she created her own naïve, half-pagan conception of what constituted harmony of body and soul, of outward and inner beauty. She had, in a word, a very natural and feminine yearning for a "hero."

A woman of Catherine's character and, above all, brain was, however, bound to inspire a certain fear in the more intelligent of her contemporaries. She commanded interest, admiration, homage, and friendship to a high degree, but she also inspired the kind of fear that precludes love. Any clear-sighted man

He was not the only one who desired to see little Paul on the throne. All those who feared Peter's rule—not only Russians, but the French and Austrian ambassadors as well—desired it, and most of all the Empress Elizabeth, who hated her unsuccessful nephew and passionately loved the child Paul. In her apartments, where she was almost permanently confined by constant bleedings, epileptic fits, and heart attacks, she heard the news that Peter was waiting impatiently for her death, and knew that he would lay insolent hands on everything that she held sacred, on her religion, her political treaties, her friends. But she was too superstitious to break her word; now that she lay at the point of death she was more than ever horrified of committing herself to any direct action. She was waiting for her hand to be forced by a sign from heaven or by an outburst from the people.

She even attempted to force some such outburst. In one of her rare intervals of comparative health, she commanded a Russian national comedy to be performed at the State Theatre. The audience in the stalls were amazed to see the royal box lit up for the first time in months, and presently Elizabeth entered it, leading the little Paul Petrovitch by the hand. The theatre was moderately empty, and the Empress ordered the soldiers on duty outside to be admitted. Twenty years before, the Guards had helped her to win the throne—perhaps they would help her to-night to secure that throne to a worthy successor. The men streamed into the theatre, bowing respectfully before the Empress; among them were some of the soldiers, old and bearded now, who had accompanied her on her journey to the Winter Palace that evening many years ago. Elizabeth set little Paul on her lap, caressed his silky curls, displaying the child and her love for him openly to these simple-hearted and impressionable men. Now was the moment for one of them to shout: "Long live the Czarevitch Paul Petrovitch!" Then surely the whole of this strange audience would take up the cry, it would be the voice of a nation making a demand, and she would surely be justified in paying heed to it . . . But no one called out. The big, rough soldiers gazed up at the royal child with

friendly faces, they liked the boy, they smiled their approval, but they remained quite unmoved.

Sadly Elizabeth returned to the palace. Heaven had withheld the sign. The designs of Fate were not those of Elizabeth, and she must bow to Fate. By this time, she had abandoned herself completely to the egotism of her ill-health and her piety. She had never led an ordered life, but now she no longer made any attempt at regulating her existence. Suddenly overcome by weariness, no matter where, she would have a bed made up, and woe to anyone who ventured to disturb this snatched slumber, no matter how important his business. She prayed and fasted incessantly, paid her physicians handsomely but rejected their medicines in favour of any wonder-working elixir her waiting-women chose to recommend. Her swollen legs could no longer carry her up and down stairs, so carpet-covered boards were laid on top of the steps, but very soon, the Empress was unable to negotiate even these. A sore appeared on her left foot, and Elizabeth would sit gazing at it for hours, saying that it was God's punishment because her father, the Great Peter, had so often kissed that beautiful foot of hers.

Her agony held Europe breathless. All eyes were fixed on the sickroom where, in reality, the final battle of the Seven Years War was being waged. Once again the interested parties made attempts to persuade the dying Empress to change her will: Louis XV wrote a long personal letter to Breteuil; the Shuvalovs planned a last intrigue to make themselves masters of the conquered provinces of East Prussia; Panin tried to put in a word for his young charge—they were all too late. Elizabeth had lost all interest in the future of Russia.

Catherine had more reason than anyone to fear her death. As Elizabeth grew weaker, Peter's schemes gained ground. He not only began to speak openly of an immediate peace with Prussia, he even spoke of an alliance, an active alliance with Frederick, and of declaring war on the former allies of Russia. He considered the advisability of a war with Denmark with the object of reclaiming a small portion of Holstein territory. As the day of his impending succession approached, he began to

display his hatred and scorn of all things Russian more flagrantly than ever. His attitude was so provocative and promised to become so intolerable that Catherine knew she had but one choice—to go down with him, or to take sides openly against him.

But this was the worst possible moment she could have chosen to take any decided action, for she was once again pregnant. This time there was not the faintest hope of persuading Peter to adopt an indulgent attitude toward Orlov's child, and Catherine was obliged to conceal her condition under her accommodating hooped skirts. As it was, the mystery which had surrounded the birth of the little Grand Duke Paul promised dangerous complications for her after Elizabeth's death. In his cups Peter was already referring to his mistress as the "Romanovna." The Dashkov, hearing him speak in this way a few days before the Empress's death, set off post-haste to the Palace—though it was the middle of the night and she was shivering with a high temperature and influenza—and forced the scandalized servants to waken the Grand Duchess.

"I can no longer endure this uncertainty," she burst out. "For heaven's sake trust me and tell me what precautions you propose to take to avert the danger that threatens your precious person."

Catherine saw the red patches of excitement burning on the sweet, childlike face of her friend, and before she replied she ordered the girl to get into bed beside her, wrapped a blanket round her frozen legs, and tucked her under her own covers. Then she said:

"I have no plans. I can do nothing but trust in God the Father and His help."

"Then," said the Dashkov, "your friends must act for you. I have courage and enthusiasm enough to inspire them all, I am prepared to make any sacrifice."

"I implore you, in the name of Heaven, to undertake nothing that will expose you to any danger," Catherine replied. "Believe me, there is nothing you can do. If anything should

happen to you on my account, I should reproach myself for the rest of my days."

"I can only promise that I shall do nothing that may expose *you* to danger. If my blind devotion brings me to the gallows, I swear that you, at any rate, shall not suffer the consequences."

These were noble and dignified sentiments, if a trifle unbalanced, a little theatrical, and not quite sincere. But while they were speaking, Catherine's plan of action took shape, and—this again is characteristic—it was formulated not by herself but by the other woman. "*Then your friends will have to act for you!*" If Catherine, belying her words, really had a plan, it was masterly inactivity. Yet she put her trust less in God than in Peter's folly and in the propagandist activities of the Orlov brothers. In most other respects Catherine had her equals, but she was unique in her capacity for using other people to carry out her unspoken and even strenuously denied designs.

Deeply moved by this display of dignified resignation, the Dashkov left the palace. In her excitement she had not even noticed that her adored friend was expecting to become a mother.

On the twenty-fifth of December 1761, at two o'clock in the afternoon, Elizabeth died. She was at once laid in state in the great reception hall, and for the next few hours a stream of notables, military and civic, passed the bier to take a last farewell of their Empress who "in death was wonderfully beautiful," more beautiful perhaps, now that her bitter fight for lost youth and health was over, than she had been for many years. There was not a dry eye; old men and rough soldiers sobbed aloud—and when their tears were exhausted they proceeded to the church to take the oath of allegiance to the new Czar. The priest who had received the Empress's last confession, and a few hours before had given her extreme unction, and who knew better than anyone how often and with what malicious glee Peter had poured scorn on the Greek faith, extolled the new Czar in a sermon in which the words

of the Gospel: "See, I bring tidings of great joy," were applied not only to the birth of Christ but to the accession of Peter III.

Catherine attended the ceremony as an ordinary spectator. Neither her name nor that of the child Paul Petrovitch was mentioned in the oath of allegiance, an exception that surprised everyone and was the first hint of an open challenge.

What Frederick feared and the Allies hoped for did not happen: not a single voice was raised in protest against Peter's succession. True, there were countless numbers who looked forward to his reign with fear and grave apprehension, but these masses were in no way organized, they had no leaders, no plan, and no programme. Everyone hoped that somebody else would "do something." Those in Paris and Vienna hoped that the Russian nobles would overthrow Peter, the nobles were banking on the Guards' hatred of the "Prussian monkey"—but the Guards paraded solemnly in front of the Palace shouting "Long Live the Czar!" and some of them had even been overheard to say: "Praise God that we have a man to rule us again after all these years of petticoat government!" Power is a strange thing. So long as he had been only the Grand Duke and a mere stroke of the pen would have sufficed to debar him from the succession, Peter was held to be a fool, a madman, a figure of fun in the eyes of the world. Now, seated on the throne with the crown upon his head, he suddenly became one with his royal robes and insignia: he was the Czar, and all those who could, made haste to please him, flatter him, serve him, and ask favours of him. The elaborate mechanism of royalty, perfected by centuries of use, had once more swung into action. It had seemed impossible that Peter could ever become Czar—now that he was Czar nothing seemed more likely than that he would remain so.

At heart Peter was neither stupid nor wicked. An unrelenting enemy like the Countess Dashkov had to admit that he possessed a streak of kindness and a certain native wit, and even Catherine

wrote in her *Memoirs*: "He was not bad at heart." Stupider and wickeder men than he had ruled unmolested to the end of their days. What made Peter incompetent as a ruler was his hard and embittered resentment of everything that he had been forced to do during the past twenty years. His natural inclinations, his personality and character—not any considerations of expediency or independent judgment—had driven him to behave in contrariness to all Elizabeth's wishes. Resentment of the predecessor is a neurosis common among princes, but it is usually mitigated by a natural patriotism and disappears as soon as the country passes to its new ruler. Peter's resentment was, however, directed against the country which, at Elizabeth's wish, he was required to rule, and during the twenty years of his apprenticeship his hatred of Russia had grown so deep and so bitter that not even the fact that Russia now belonged to him could soften it.

Peter was a neurotic, all his actions bore the unmistakable stamp of his neurosis, which were expressed in meaningless, uncontrollable impatience, over-estimation of external details, and an utter inability to face facts. In dealing with a normal and healthy character, skill and patience can correct the gravest faults, but in the unhealthy atmosphere of neuroticism even the most natural things become crazy and perverted. Peter's first political act, as might have been expected, was to make peace with Prussia. On the very night of Elizabeth's death he sent his aide-de-camp, Godovitch, with a fervent message of devotion to Frederick, and despatched couriers to all the fighting regiments with instructions to cease hostilities immediately. Actually this armistice, after five years of bloodshed, came as a relief to all the nations concerned, and even the fact that it meant relinquishing advantages so dearly won was no cause for grave dissatisfaction to the Russians, since Russia had not entered the war with the object of land annexation, and any insistence on the retaining of conquered territory would have meant not only a prolongation of the war with Prussia but further disputes between Russia and her Allies. If Peter had agreed, merely as a formality, to

call a meeting of his ministers and draw up a peace treaty in which the interests of the Russian people and Russian commerce were safeguarded, he would have received the blessing of the nation. But Peter had so little interest in Russia that he refused even to pretend concern for its welfare. He signed the treaty independently and alone, prompted by his personal esteem for Frederick II, and he worded it in a way that was characteristic of his homo-erotic worship for his unknown hero: he addressed Frederick not as the king of a victorious country might address a vanquished king, not even as one equal to another, but as a soldier addressing his war-lord. He offered Russia as a vassal state to the Prussian king who, only the day before, had been faced with defeat, and had continued his campaign in the slender hope of gaining support from Turkey. The wily Frederick, who had been saved by a miracle from the most dangerous predicament of his career, immediately realized that he was being offered more than he wanted and more than was good for him, and while he wrote to his friend D'Argens: "The young Russian Czar is a divine creature; altars should be set up to him," he sent a letter by the new ambassador, Baron Goltz, to his over-zealous disciple giving him sound and confidential advice. He counselled Peter to respect the feelings of the people, not to insist upon too many reforms, to put these into action as slowly as possible, and above all he urged him to keep on good terms with his clever wife.

But though Peter's infatuation remained unabated, he found himself unable to follow his illustrious friend's advice. His sick mind revolted against its sound good sense. He had never understood Frederick, he saw him in the distorted perspective of a pigmy viewing a giant, seeing only his military boots, interpreting as a scandalous libel the reports that in his leisure hours the soldier-king read Voltaire and even wrote verses himself. He had formed his god in his own image, and the Frederick to whom he gazed up in worshipful awe was a gigantic sergeant-major. In order to resemble his hero—not because he found any pleasure in the routine—Peter began his reign with a show of great outward activity; he rose early,

paraded his troops himself, and, knowing that it was Frederick's custom to do so, interviewed his ministers and the foreign ambassadors. This display of energy, compared with the slackness that had characterized the last years of Elizabeth's reign, was a welcome change and earned the young Czar universal approval. He issued a flood of ukases, some extremely sensible, others quite ridiculous, all according to whether they had been drawn up by Peter or by his secretary, Volkov. On one and the same day the dread Secret Chancery, the terror of all political suspects, was abolished and permission was given to gentlemen of the Court to shoot ravens in the streets of Petersburg. It was in the interests of Volkov, Vorontzov, and the men who surrounded Peter, that he should remain popular, and for the time being he listened to their counsels. He allowed the famous Siberian exiles to return--Lestoque, who had once been Elizabeth's friend and had subsequently fallen into disgrace; Biron, that fantastic adventurer, the son of a groom who, under Anna Ivanovna, had become Duke of Courland; and the eighty-year-old General Münnich, who under Anna Leopoldovna had overthrown Biron. Only Bestushev, Catherine's friend, was not recalled. On Volkov's advice the Shuvalovs' monopolies were curtailed, the tax removed from the cod-fishing industry, and subsidies granted to the universities and the academies of fine art. The ukase by which the nobles were freed from compulsory military service was especially popular, so popular indeed that the Senate declared its intention of erecting a statue to the new Czar.

But Peter's days, which began in so praiseworthy a fashion, ended with opulent banquets at which the Czar ordained that light-coloured, elaborate costumes were to be worn, and which usually developed into noisy and disgraceful orgies, with Peter helplessly drunk at the side of his mistress, Elizabeth Vorontzov. These orgies took place within a few days of the Empress's death, while her body still lay under the same roof. Many of Peter's guests had genuinely loved the Empress and felt thoroughly ashamed of this enforced betrayal of the dead; many of them were men of pious and reverential instincts who

were deeply offended by what they saw, and even more so by the part they themselves were forced to play in order not to offend the Czar. Their thoughts turned with pity to Catherine, who attended none of these banquets but lived in strict seclusion throughout the period of mourning.

During the six weeks that Elizabeth's body lay in state according to orthodox Russian custom, the palace was thrown open to the public twice a day, so that the people might pay a last tribute to their dead sovereign. The simple folk streamed in hundreds and thousands to view the body resting on a magnificent sarcophagus which was embellished with statues, gilt carving, a canopy of gold brocade and an ermine coverlet reaching to the ground, escutcheons, scrolls, artificial foliage, and innumerable candles—the total cost of which could not have been less than a hundred thousand roubles. And every day a woman's figure in deep black could be seen kneeling beside this splendid bier, apparently absorbed in grief and prayers. The people nudged each other and whispered: "That is the Empress!" For six whole weeks Catherine spent hours each day on her knees beside the body, in spite of her advancing pregnancy and the fact that the corpse was proclaiming its presence to more than one of the five senses. Her eyes remained downcast, but she knew that the eyes of others were upon her, and that the hearts of the simple people were inexpressibly moved by the spectacle of her humble piety. The Russian people were religious children who had loved Elizabeth and revered her as the head of their Church. They had heard little about her sins, but they knew of her pilgrimages, her periods of penance, her devotion to various convents and saints. Elizabeth had been a "Little Mother" who commanded a place in the hearts of her people without ever bothering to do very much for them.

Sometimes Peter visited the sarcophagus: his manner on these occasions was unconstrained, he talked in a loud voice, would joke with the ladies, or find fault with the shoe-buckles, the cravats, of the gentlemen who were attending him. The solemn light of the sentinel candles, the presence of majestic

death, threw the contrast between Catherine's quiet dignity and Peter's cynical irreverence into sharp relief and gave it the flavour of some primitive morality play. And for the simple people it was a drama; Catherine knew that, and she played her part well.

Peter was no actor. That may be praise for a private individual, but not for an Emperor who, unless he is prepared to govern with a mailed fist, must learn to please his people. Only those who refuse to acknowledge the existing order of things and are independent of public opinion, can afford to slight it—certainly not an Emperor whose duty it is to maintain the existing order and who depends upon public opinion for the success of his task. "Respect the feelings of your people," Frederick had written, but how could Peter respect something of which he was entirely ignorant? He forgot Frederick's words, but instead he wore the uniform of the Prussian regiment of which Frederick had created him Lieutenant-General, flaunting it before the eyes of unhappy men and women who had lost their sons in the war against Prussia. The representatives of European powers listened in amazement, and those of Russia's former allies in horror, while Peter boasted openly at their conferences of how treacherously as Grand Duke he had rendered excellent service to Frederick by intercepting the orders issued to the Russian troops, or by sending advance information of their movements to the Prussian king. Sometimes in his fits of drunkenness they would hear him say to Baron Goltz, the German ambassador: "Let us drink to the health of your king, our master! He has given me a regiment, I hope that he will not dismiss me!"

In his heart Peter had never felt himself equal to the task of ruling Russia, but he had not been able to escape his fate: now it had overwhelmed him. He found himself very much in the position of the victim of an anxiety-dream who is thrust suddenly and without warning into the arena face to face with an angry bull. As in the dream, the bull remains comparatively quiet and gentle at first; as in the dream fear is transformed to a swaggering self-confidence, the dreamer

really begins to believe that he is a toreador, he teases the bull, takes it by the horns. . . . From cowardice to megalomania is but a step: Peter took that step. Because all his orders were obeyed, because he was surrounded by sycophants, because no audible voice was raised in protest against him, he believed that he could not only rule Russia but could do whatever he pleased with the country. He had taken the bull by the horns.

The throne was upheld by two powerful forces, the army and the Church, and the Czar was head of both. But Peter misunderstood the situation. He failed to realize that his own power was dependent on these institutions; he only grasped the fact that he was their official head and consequently imagined that he was at liberty to do as he pleased. The army belonged to him, therefore he was free to turn it into a Prussian army, free to abolish the bottle-green uniforms with their long coats and replace them by short Prussian tunics, free to drill his soldiers in the Prussian manner. Was there ever a more monstrous notion than that of clothing an army, at the end of a victorious five years' war, in the uniforms of the enemy, of drilling it according to the enemy's methods? The new Prussian uniforms wounded the Russians' national pride, and Prussian military drill was entirely unsuited to their temperament. They went through their daily routine with set teeth. The discontent spread to the officers who, regardless of seniority, were compelled to attend all parades whatever the weather. Distinguished strategists privately engaged young German officers to teach them the elements of Prussian military drill, for the Czar would never hesitate to rebuke an officer who had won a battle for Russia, for a badly delivered "About turn!" A culminating act of tactlessness, and one that betrayed an utter lack of practical common sense, was Peter's appointment of his uncle, Prince George of Holstein—a stranger, a German, and a man without any military record or experience whatever—as colonel-in-command of this thoroughly disgruntled and dissatisfied army. In the past the Czar himself had always been commander-in-chief of the Russian army.

The army was his, and so in the April of that year Peter

signed a treaty of "eternal peace" with Frederick, by which he bound himself to place a certain number of his troops at the service of the Prussian king. Thus the Russian soldiers, after fighting against Frederick for five years, were to be called upon to open fire on their former allies at Frederick's command. The self-willed boy who now sat on the throne of Russia had played too long with tin soldiers; he did not know that a flesh-and-blood soldier, even if he is a mercenary, a mere vassal, requires the stimulus of love or hate before he can fight—hate for the enemy, love for his own cause; he did not know that love and hate do not spring into life at a word of command, that they must be created by deliberate and skilful propaganda. Peter had no time for this. The unreasoning impatience of the neurotic forced him into making new decisions daily; hardly was the peace with Prussia concluded that he wanted to start a new war with Denmark. Within three months of inheriting the greatest empire in the world he was anxious to embark on a campaign of aggression for the sake of a few miserable square miles of land to which, as Prince of Holstein, he believed he could lay a claim. The idea of this war proved even more unpopular than the peace with Prussia: every self-respecting member of the Russian army resolved to hand in his resignation. What possible interest could Russia have in the aggrandizement of Holstein? Ever since Peter had come to the throne, the Holsteiners had become more impudent and more universally disliked; they held the best and most lucrative positions in the government, they had free access to the ear and the heart of the young Czar. When it became known that Peter intended to disband the Life Guards—the proudest and most trustworthy regiment in the country—and to replace them by Holstein troops, there could be no more doubt that the Duke of Holstein had dug the grave of the Russian Czar.

Wars are notoriously expensive. When Peter came to the throne the Russian regiments which were fighting in Prussia had been without pay for two months. Yet he was preparing for a new war with Denmark. The state coffers were empty.

How could fresh funds be raised? In March a ukase appeared by which it was proposed to requisition all Church property for the state. Even Peter the Great had shrunk from the ticklish problem of secularizing Church properties. Peter III could hardly have solved it even if he had affected to be a devout member of the Church whose head he was, but here again he refused to exert himself to the extent of putting up just enough pretence to spare people's feelings. Once again he was confusing big issues with small ones, the essential with the incidental, superficialities with fundamentals. He jeered at Russian dogma, behaved provokingly whenever he entered a church, spoke of doing away with the magnificent robes of the priests and clothing them in the simple black cassocks of the German clergy, threatened to order them to cut off their long and awe-inspiring beards, to remove all holy pictures save those of Christ and the Virgin Mary from the churches, and to close the private chapels in the houses of the nobles. He even planned to erect a Protestant chapel in the palace itself. Because he was totally ignorant of them, he tampered with forces which a man like Peter the Great had held in awe. He imagined that by issuing a few ukases he could revolutionize the most conservative and tradition-bound country of Europe. He tweaked the bull's ear, but his own ears were deaf to the threatening snort of the beast. Baron Goltz wrote to Frederick: "News from the distant provinces reports that the clergy are everywhere stirring up the people against the Czar and that the spirit of indignation and unrest is becoming so widespread that the governors do not know how to keep the people within bounds." Archbishop Arsenij of Rostov drew up a petition couched in such violent words that it rather resembled a manifesto and had this delivered to the Czar: Peter flew into a rage, and ordered the innocent monk who had acted as messenger to be thrown into prison.

During the early days of Peter's reign, Catherine had appeared regularly each morning in his study, but she had been so ill received, her advice had been greeted with such

undisguised contempt, that she very soon abandoned these visits. "It is already clear," Breteuil wrote to Paris at the beginning of January, "that the Empress counts for nothing, and I believe she is seeking to arm herself with philosophy. The Czar has redoubled his attentions to Mademoiselle Vorontzov and appointed her first lady of the Court, above all other ladies of rank." The Czar went even further than that. He demanded that everybody should treat his mistress with greater respect than they accorded his wife. One evening when he was dining with the Vorontzov, he sent for Count Hordt, whom he knew to be with Catherine. Hordt, a gallant Swedish gentleman, declined to come. A few minutes later Peter himself appeared, scarlet with anger, crying: "The Countess Vorontzov expects you, I advise you not to keep the lady waiting!" He now began to speak quite openly of getting rid of Catherine at the first opportunity, either by locking her up in a convent or by sending her back to Germany.

All this might conceivably be explained by his growing passion for Elizabeth Vorontzov. But when he forbade the jeweller, Ponzie, to carry out any order of Catherine's, and even went to the trouble of forbidding the gardener to deliver her favourite fruits, it can be assumed that this display of petty hate was occasioned by deeper motives. His hatred for Catherine was much older than his love for the Vorontzov; it had been born almost twenty years before, on the day she had humiliated him by showing her horror at his ugliness after he had recovered from the smallpox. A thousand fresh humiliations had been added to the first in the course of those twenty years, and most of them could be attributed to Catherine's sense of superiority. He had always known that she was the cleverer and the stronger of the two, but whereas in the past he had often needed her superior strength, he now believed he was powerful enough to revenge himself for countless insults to his pride. And yet he never ceased to fear her. He had the power to crush her, but he dared not share his power with her. He knew that once he began to ask for her opinions or advice, Catherine would automatically take entire

charge of his affairs. At the root of his megalomania lay the fear of the weakling for the strong, the uneasiness of incompetence in the presence of efficiency. Congenital weakness allied to external power are what make the tyrant. That is why Peter, who was not a bad man at heart, became a spiteful and cruel tyrant to his wife. This, and not his passion for the Vorontzov, turned his desire to humiliate and degrade Catherine, and get her out of the way, into an obsession. She must be made to feel his power to the extent, if possible, of being banished from the country, for only in this way could Peter find release from the intolerable thought that haunted him: he was the all-powerful Czar, yet his wife was cleverer than he.

Catherine endured all his insults in silence. Since Elizabeth's death she had appeared in public only twice, and as yet had uttered no word on the subject of her husband's behaviour. "The Empress," Breteuil wrote, "is treated with elaborate contempt and responds with dignity and with tears. The people share her sorrow and are ever ready with good but unavailing wishes." Another time he wrote: "The Empress is in a dreadful position. She endures the insults of the Emperor, the haughtiness of Mademoiselle Vorontzov, with great patience—but I cannot think that the Empress, whose courage and energy I know well, will not one day resort to desperate measures. She has friends who try to comfort her, and who are ready to dare everything for her sake, should she demand it of them." Breteuil was right: Catherine's patience was only superficial, a pose forced on her by her physical condition. When the Dashkov, Panin, and others suggested taking active steps to improve her position, she could do nothing but beg them to be as patient as she was, and wait for fate to take its course. Yet she herself was by no means so vague as her words suggested; she knew that she must be rid of the burden in her body before she could think of acting. This enforced inactivity, this attitude of dignified and humble resignation, won her innumerable friends. Peter's insults merely reflected on himself. "Peter's unworthiness made her shine the more by comparison," Catherine herself wrote later, speaking in

the third person: "He was like a small black patch on a beautiful face."

At the end of March the Court repaired to the newly completed Winter Palace. Peter appropriated the main wing of the building for his own use, installing the Vorontzov in the rooms adjoining his, and relegating Catherine to an apartment at the other end of the palace. She accepted this fresh slight without a murmur; it suited her admirably. As the time of her confinement approached she even appeared at one of Peter's banquets, in order to disarm suspicion, forcing herself to endure the stench of tobacco smoke, the drunken laughter, the Vorontzov's sniggers, and her husband's stupid chatter. There is a story that at the last minute Peter got wind of her condition, and swore "to kill the she-devil on the spot." But as he was making his way to Catherine's apartments he was interrupted by the sudden ringing of the fire alarms. By the time he and his entourage had returned from the scene of the fire, Catherine's labour was ended, and she was waiting to receive him, dressed, powdered, and coiffed, so that his suspicions, for lack of evidence, were perforce allayed. The alarm, however, had been given at the crucial moment by her faithful servant, Shkurin, who, the report says, set fire to his own house.

Whatever the truth of this story, Orlov's son—later Alexis Gregorevitch Brobinsky—was born on the eleventh of April without causing any scandal, and was immediately handed over to the care of Shkurin's wife. Ten days later, on her thirty-third birthday, Catherine received a large deputation who came to offer her congratulations. And now, for the first time since she had become Empress, she spoke her mind. She told Count Mercy, the Austrian ambassador, that "she heartily detested the new treaty with the sworn enemy." There could be no doubt of her meaning. Catherine was repudiating her husband's policy, openly taking sides against him, and looking about for allies. It was only a casual remark dropped at a birthday party, but the whole Court knew of it before the day was out, couriers had sped with the news to

Vienna and Paris, diplomatic hopes and conjectures had been roused.

Catherine was rid of her burden. The fight had begun.

In Russia, as everywhere else, money was an indispensable necessity, and Catherine had no money. She asked Breteuil to procure her a loan of a hundred thousand roubles, but the Frenchman, though he wished Catherine every success, did not feel her success to be sufficiently assured to warrant paying such a price to secure her support for French interests. An English merchant named Weldten finally advanced her the money. But it was a comparatively small sum. To carry through a revolution on a large scale it was necessary to have the support not only of officers and nobles, who could be won by an appeal to their honour and patriotism, but also of the common soldiers, and no one had a more intimate knowledge of the common Russian soldier than the brothers Orlov: wine was far more effective than well-water in buying their loyalty. Catherine was quick to realize this, she knew the ways of her adopted land and the infallible magic of bribery. When she heard that the post of Paymaster of Artillery had fallen vacant, she gave a hint to General Villebois and the twenty-seven-year-old Gregory Orlov was entrusted with this responsible position. Very soon the artillery funds began to flow freely down the throats of the soldiers. Tongues loosened by unstinted rations of wine gave vent to the pent-up resentment against Peter and lavished praise upon Catherine. Who can profess to distinguish the true from the false, the spontaneous from the artificial, in the flood-tide of a wave of national propaganda? Powder must be to hand before it can be set alight—more one cannot say. Peter had supplied the powder, the Orlovs set the fuse.

Meanwhile the Dashkov was scheming busily elsewhere. She continued to frequent the Court and to play her childish pranks with Peter, who indulgently humoured his mistress's little sister. In this way she was able to keep in close touch with those who were momentarily in power; she tried to find supporters among her husband's friends and appealed to the

Lieutenants Passek and Bredechín of the Preobrazhensky regiment, and to the brothers Rossólev of the Ismaelov regiment. She was particularly anxious to win over Cyril Rasumovsky, the brother of Elizabeth's one-time favourite, because she knew that he was popular with the army, and also because she knew he was in love with Catherine. But neither she nor Orlov were able to make the wily old Russian commit himself. To the most cunning questions he would reply that "it needed a cleverer man than he to decide." Later he was to reveal himself as a staunch ally, but he had one confederate only, and that was Catherine herself. The little Dashkov had better luck with the Archbishop of Novgorod. This reverent man, who was held in veneration by the whole of the Russian clergy, openly declared himself prepared to give his blessing to what he hoped God would soon bring to pass.

With a caution that became not only his position, but still more his phlegmatic character, Panin sounded the members of the Senate, keeping ears and eyes open and missing nothing. Oddly enough, one of Peter's first actions on his accession had been to create this portly, indolent, peace-loving man, who had never in his life worn a uniform and who heartily detested everything connected with soldiering, General of the Infantry. This appointment was not actuated by malice: Peter genuinely wished to please him, he wanted to ingratiate himself with Panin, and imagined that the Count would be as delighted with his dashing new uniform as Peter himself would have been. When Panin was informed by the Czar's adjutant of his new appointment he remarked laconically that if there was no other way of evading this undeserved honour, he would be forced to return to Sweden. Peter was furious. "I have always been told that this Panin was a man of intelligence," he cried. "Never let me hear it said again." But an appointment was an appointment, Panin remained a General, though not on "active service." He made no attempt to mend his indolent ways and received only the civilian pay accruing to his new rank. Yet the fact that he had been given this sinecure only

increased the old man's anger at the stupid way in which the new Czar was exercising his absolute power. Without abandoning his reserve he contrived to put himself in touch with other dissatisfied spirits, who were aware of his attitude and counted on his cool resource in the hour of need.

Sometimes Panin would confer with the Countess Dashkov, and she let him believe that they were both working for the same end, namely to overthrow Peter and secure the legitimate succession of the little Czarevitch. Sometimes, too, she would hold a council of war with the Orlov brothers. She looked on these rough, uneducated men, who could barely read or write, as subordinates who had been instructed to receive her orders and carry them out without question. The confederates in the plot mistrusted and lied to each other, each was working for a different cause, a different end, and they each had different motives. Their preparations were elaborate and by no means planned for hurried execution. To win over the Senate and the Synod, to secure the allegiance of the people with the help of the clergy, to incite the army by mouth-to-mouth propaganda, were schemes that required years of intensive and risky work. The confederates knew this, and believed that they would have to wait for an indefinite period before success finally came to crown their efforts. They had forgotten their most powerful ally. The Dashkov, the Orlovs, the officers of the Guard, the bishops, were all performing their various tasks, but more effectively than any of them Peter was working for his own destruction.

Three months after his accession he had abandoned even the pretence of governing. His few sober hours were spent in trivial military occupations, visiting the barracks, attending parades, and preparing for the war against Denmark. Ever since his two uncles had arrived from Holstein to share in their nephew's newly-acquired glory, he had once more immersed himself in Holstein affairs to the exclusion of everything else. His shrewd Russian advisers entirely lost what little influence they had over him; at the least hint of opposition he would

fling abuse at their heads, and worse—he even struck Volkov, Narychkin, and Melgunov in public.

On the third of June he circulated a memorandum in the Senate which disclosed the fact that there was a deficit in the national budget of one-tenth of the nation's income, and "that this deficit was due to the expense of maintaining the troops abroad." Peter had put the troops stationed in Schleswig at the disposal of Frederick, and was mobilizing fresh troops in Livland for his campaign against Denmark.

On the eighth of June the Department for Foreign Affairs issued the information that the Khan of the Crimea had invaded the Russian frontiers "with overwhelming forces." Peter did not care a button for Russia's frontiers; his reply was to give orders that horses were to be held in readiness at all post stations for his journey to Denmark. He was informed that there was serious unrest in the province of Astrakan, that the peasants were holding seditious meetings in the factories and on the farms. He sent a single regiment to quell the disturbances; he needed all his remaining soldiers for the Danish campaign, for this senseless, thoroughly unpopular and unnecessary war over an unimportant piece of Holstein territory about which nobody except himself cared two straws.

No one who was sensitive to public opinion and aware of its power could remain blind to the danger. An unpopular Czar, at the beginning of his reign, after five years of exhausting and crippling warfare, was proposing to plunge the country into a new and universally undesired war. Moreover, Peter had not yet been crowned. He was asking his soldiers to fight and die for him before he had been divinely anointed, a ceremony with which no Russian emperor had ever dared to dispense. But Peter refused to discuss his coronation: his idol, the King of Prussia, had never been crowned, he had entered the glorious war against Austria soon after his accession to the throne, and Peter was determined to act likewise, winning his own laurels in Denmark.

Baron Goltz wrote to Frederick II: "No one in the world

save Your Majesty can persuade the Emperor to abandon this fatal war." Frederick at once wrote Peter a long, explanatory letter. The not unnatural wish to keep his devoted admirer on the throne of Russia gave his words a heartfelt warmth. "I have no right to meddle in Your Highness's affairs," he wrote, "and to poke my nose in everywhere, but I speak now as a private individual and a well-wisher, who may hide none of his thoughts from a friend. I will confess that I wish most fervently Your Highness had allowed himself to be crowned, for such a ceremony would impress a people accustomed to witnessing the coronation of its sovereigns. . . . Your Highness may remember what happened during the first absence from home of Peter I, when his own sister plotted to overthrow him. Let Your Highness imagine that some wretch, some discontented person, should during your absence plot to restore Ivan to the throne, and that, with the help of foreign money, Ivan should escape from the fortress, gather troops about him—would Your Highness not then be obliged to hasten home from the war, even in the hour of victory, to stamp out the fires of rebellion?" Frederick was aware of the extent of the danger, and it is quite likely that he knew from which quarter it threatened. But, having already advised Peter to remain on good terms with his wife, he could not allow himself to be more explicit on this point, except for the hint expressed in the words: "Peter I . . . his own sister."

Peter remained deaf to his friend's advice. He told Frederick that he was worrying himself unnecessarily, that "anyone who understood the Russians need have no fear of them." It was not his infatuation for the Prussian king that was the cause of his downfall, but the superficial nature of that infatuation. "He is my God," Peter had been heard to remark. But he did not obey his God, he merely tried to imitate his divineness.

On the tenth of June he was informed that the fleet was in no condition to undertake the transport of troops to Denmark, because a large number of the sailors had been stricken down by an epidemic. To the horror of everyone Peter immediately

issued a ukase—whether he was drunk or sober at the time we do not know—commanding the sick navy “to recover immediately.”

On the same day celebrations of the Russian-English-Prussian alliance began. In honour of the occasion a number of statues representing figures symbolical of Peace had been ordered from Belgium, and the Court poet wrote a drama entitled *La Pace degli Eroi*, which the Court composer set to music. Garlands of flowers festooned golden tablets bearing the names of Frederick, George, and Peter, a huge firework display had been arranged, and a salute of cannons was to be fired at the moment when the toast of eternal peace was given.

These elaborate celebrations began with the famous banquet which was to end so disastrously and to prove the psychological turning-point in the drama of the Russian throne. Five hundred places had been set; all the important government officials, foreign diplomats, the most distinguished members of the aristocracy and the army were present. Catherine sat at the centre of the table, Peter at the head beside the German ambassador. He proposed three toasts. “The health of the Imperial family,” “The eternal duration of the peace between Russia, England, and Prussia,” and “The health of the King of Prussia.” When the health of the Imperial family was drunk, Peter sent his adjutant, Count Godovitch, to ask Catherine why she had not risen to drink the toast. Catherine replied that since the Imperial family consisted only of herself, her husband, and her son, she had not considered it necessary to rise. Godovitch delivered the message, and the Czar sent him back immediately to tell his wife she was “a silly fool”—*dura*, in Russian—otherwise she would have known that his two Holstein uncles were also members of the Imperial family. Then, fearing that Godovitch might not deliver the message in its full crudity, he leaned forward and shouted down the table to his wife: “Dura! Dura!”

For a moment there was silence in the great hall. Everyone present realized that something outrageous, something un-

forgivable had happened. All eyes were fastened on Catherine: she had turned deathly pale, and her eyes filled with tears. But she was the first to recover herself. She turned to Count Stroganov, who was standing behind her chair, and begged him to tell her a funny story quickly to distract her thoughts. Stroganov had the presence of mind to begin a light-hearted conversation, and was exiled to his provincial estates that same night for his pains.

There were five hundred witnesses of this disgraceful incident. Five hundred people felt disgust at the Czar's uncouth behaviour, sympathy with the Empress, and admiration for her splendid fortitude. All the things with which Catherine had in the past reproached herself, her scruples concerning her affairs with Saltykov and Poniatovsky, were wiped out by this exhibition of insulting brutality. In a second every hesitant sympathizer was won over to her side. It was characteristic of Catherine that she flourished in adversity, that she grew great by her capacity for enduring humiliation—and it was therefore fitting that this, the greatest humiliation she had ever experienced, should be the signal for the beginning of her supreme struggle for power. Insulted as an Empress before the whole Court, as a wife before her husband's mistress, she had won the most telling victory of her career: the right, in her own eyes, and in the eyes of the world, to assert herself.

She said later that it was on this evening that she first began to listen to the counsels of her husband's enemies. That is not true. It is true, however, that until then she had waited, hesitated, procrastinated. Unlike Peter she had a certain respect for the law—or rather, she respected the respect of others for the law, and she was anxious not to abuse that trust which alone can ensure a long and peaceful reign. Not until Peter had put himself publicly in the wrong was she prepared to consider seriously the possibility of overthrowing him. Her conferences with Orlov took a more definite tone. A plan was suggested to arrest Peter in his room, as Elizabeth had arrested the little Czar Ivan. But Elizabeth had been the daughter of Peter the Great, she had been appointed to the

succession in her mother's will, and Catherine had no claim to the throne either by blood or by any legal act. And Peter was not an infant in arms. For two days the celebrations continued uninterrupted, then Peter moved to Oranienbaum. There he was surrounded by fifteen hundred armed Holstein soldiers. The handsome Gregory, a born gambler, accustomed to staking everything on the turn of a card, was impatient for the game to begin. He was convinced that Catherine had only to give a sign for the whole of Russia to rise up against its hated Czar. . . .

But Catherine refused to give the sign—she was waiting for a sign herself. She was not superstitious like Elizabeth, and it was not a sign from heaven for which she was waiting; she was hoping that a situation would arise to force her hand and justify her in the eyes of the world. She had no desire deliberately to take the responsibility of an action of still uncertain issue, and one that would certainly mean the shedding of blood and much misery. She knew the sympathy which she could command as a wronged and helpless woman would be lost to her the moment she took up arms against her own husband, the constitutional monarch of Russia. And even though she did not need this sympathy to carry out her *coup d'état*, she saw beyond the moment to the time when she would reign as a usurper, and her only claim to the throne would lie in the goodwill of the nation. These were extremely logical considerations, but they were prompted by something deeper than logic—by Catherine's brilliant intuition. She was no man-woman; she had masculine ambitions, but she remained essentially a woman. Her attitude toward fate was the attitude of a woman toward her lover: passionate, challenging, but at the same time passive. She had no desire to master fate, she longed, with all the strength of her superhuman will, to be mastered by fate.

Catherine remained alone in Petersburg for four days, from the twelfth to the sixteenth of June, before she moved to Peterhof. Nothing is known of her activities during this time, neither she nor any of her confederates left a record of what

happened during those four days. It may however be assumed that she was preparing the manifesto which was to be issued to the nation as soon as the *coup d'état* had been accomplished, and that she managed somehow to send a draft of it to Cyril Rasumovsky, for it was in his possession when the revolution broke out. It is very probable that she used Alexis Orlov and not Gregory to help her in this, for the handsome Gregory had been shadowed by spies of the state police for some time past, though so clumsily that he was quite aware of the identity of the chief agent, Lieutenant Perfilov, and was able to twist him round his little finger. One thing is certain: those who were working for Catherine pinned their hopes to the Danish campaign, to Peter's absence, and to the state of general unrest and disorder in which he would leave the country.

Once again it was Peter himself who hastened his doom in an unexpected manner. Ever since he had disgraced himself by foolishly insulting his wife, there had been no restraining him. But his abuse of Catherine returned like a boomerang, he made things impossible not for her but for himself. He realized this and his hatred for her was redoubled; the sight of her, the mere fact of her existence, became intolerable to him. He banished her from his presence, commanding her to remain at Peterhof while he and his mistress, surrounded by his soldiers and a crowd of Court ladies were in residence at Oranienbaum. As usual, wine loosened his tongue; he promised that as soon as he had got rid of Catherine, he would allow all the other ladies of the Court to divorce their husbands and choose new partners. The ladies, whose morals had relaxed considerably under the influence of the royal example and the constant flow of wine, applauded this decision. But the road from Oranienbaum to the capital was a short one; what was said one evening in the country was known in Petersburg the next morning, and the ladies' husbands, who held important positions in the government, ground their teeth. False rumours were added to true ones. Peter had erected a Protestant chapel for his Holstein officers at Oranien-

baum—in Petersburg it was said that the Czar himself had taken holy communion in accordance with the Protestant ritual. The distance from Petersburg to Astrakan was greater, and the rumours had more time to grow: in Astrakan it was said that the Czar had sold the army to the King of Prussia on condition that it never returned to Russia. And all this time the Senate was busy making the final preparations for the departure of the troops to Denmark.

On the twenty-first of June a great banquet was given at Oranienbaum, which Catherine was requested to attend. Soon after her arrival she met the jeweller, Ponzié, and asked him to take her Order of St. Catherine to make some slight necessary repair. Ponzié replied that in her own interests it were better the Empress should not give him the Order, since he had just arrived at Oranienbaum to deliver an Order of St. Catherine for Elizabeth Vorontzov, and the Emperor would be sure to take offence if the Empress failed to wear her own Order on the same evening.

Only members of the Imperial family were permitted to wear the Order of St. Catherine. It was perfectly clear that by this gift to his mistress the Czar meant to show that she would shortly become a member of the Imperial family; he was, in fact, announcing his forthcoming marriage to the Vorontzov. Catherine received the news in silence. She remained silent throughout the festivities, silent while a toy fleet was launched on the lake in the park, silent "with a bored expression on her face" while Peter played the violin in an amateur orchestra, looked on in silence while Peter himself pinned the Order of St. Catherine to Elizabeth Vorontzov's breast.

If there was one thing Peter could not endure it was her silence, her patience. Could nothing move this woman from her terrible calm that was perpetually putting him in the wrong? Could nothing sting her to an angry outburst, an ugly retort, shock her out of that dignified and monstrous submission? Towards evening, when he was flushed with drink, Peter ordered his adjutant, Bariatsky, to arrest the

Empress. Bariatinsky, who neither dared to obey nor disobey, went for advice to the Czar's uncle, Prince George of Holstein, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that the old man dissuaded Peter, now hopelessly drunk and mad with hate, from his purpose. Catherine returned unmolested to Peterhof.

But it was too late. Peter had given the sign. The news that he meant to arrest the Empress reached the city, reached Catherine's friends, reached the Guards, and the soldiers. No one doubted that he would one day carry out the threat he had been forced to abandon for the moment against his will. Fresh unrest was added to the discontent already rife concerning the new war with Denmark. Excited groups collected in the streets criticizing the government and the Czar, and the police had difficulty in remaining deaf to these open demonstrations and in breaking up the crowds without attracting attention; here, there, everywhere angry citizens assembled to voice their complaints. In the barracks it was even worse. One day a trooper of the Dragoons demanded naïvely of General Ismaelov "why they did not depose the Czar." Ismaelov told him to go to the devil. But the unrest grew, the inflamed Guards urged their officers to take some action to protect the Empress. The conspirators, fearing a premature outbreak of the revolution, endeavoured to pacify these restless spirits. And so it happened that a certain Captain Passek, in a state of some excitement, delivered "treasonable speeches against the Emperor," and was overheard by a spy.

On the thirtieth of June, Peter was to leave for Denmark at the head of his troops, and he had planned to celebrate his name-day, which fell on the twenty-ninth, at Peterhof on the evening before his departure.

Captain Passek was arrested on the evening of the twenty-seventh.

"Your conspiracy," wrote that inexorable critic, Frederick II, "was madness and badly planned." He was right. Catherine's revolution was so full of errors that, dispassionately viewed,

it must have seemed madness to hope it could succeed. The individual conspirators had practically no means of communication; they mistrusted, spied on, and lied to each other; they all had different plans for the future, and no common plan of action. Before any sort of revolutionary tactics had been even remotely considered, there were countless conspirators in the field—including the common soldiers they must have numbered nearly ten thousand! Here was a treasonable plot directed against the state and its ruler, which was known to ten thousand people! This conspiracy showed all the errors that an illegal revolutionary movement could possibly have, but it had one overwhelming advantage—it was genuine.

Mistakes may even prove of advantage in the case of a genuine revolution that is rooted in the hearts of the people and has their full support. The fact that its leaders were so oddly assorted was favourable to its success: news of the movement was able to reach every section of the population, and the suspicion with which the leaders regarded each other served as an elaborate spy service. It was these very mistakes which finally put an end to uncertainty and delay and brought matters to a head at what proved to be exactly the right moment.

The arrest of the intoxicated Captain Passek on a charge of uttering "offensive and treasonable speeches against His Majesty the Emperor" was an accident that was bound to happen sooner or later where so many unorganized confederates were at work, but it caused considerable alarm and confusion among the conspirators. Gregory Orlov hurried to inform Countess Dashkov of the appalling news and found her closeted with Panin: all personal considerations, all individual disagreements were dropped in view of this immediate danger. Passek had been arrested, by to-morrow everything might be known, by the day after to-morrow everything might be lost. Means would doubtless be found of making Passek talk, but there might even be no need to use them, quite likely the Czar's friends already knew enough to take action against the conspirators. To-morrow wholesale arrests would begin to be made, followed by executions and banishments to Siberia.

And the woman for whose sake the revolution had been planned, who was the head and heart of the whole conspiracy, would be the first to suffer. For months Peter had been looking for an excuse to rid himself of Catherine: now he had it.

Later Panin and the Dashkov were to have endless arguments as to which of them could claim the credit for having thought of sending word to the Empress at Peterhof that night. Which-ever it was, one thing is clear: they realized in the course of their three-cornered discussion that they could count on their freedom for no more than a few hours, and that Catherine must be saved while there was still time. The impulsive Dashkov was inflamed with a desire to risk her own life by going to Peterhof to warn her adored friend—but unfortunately the masculine attire she had ordered for herself to wear on the great day the revolution broke out was not ready. A wide hooped skirt would be a more than dangerous costume for an errand that must be undertaken with the strictest secrecy. In the end Gregory Orlov's youngest brother, Alexis, together with Lieutenant Vassili Bibikov, set off for Peterhof shortly after midnight in a shabby hired carriage.

While they drove slowly—for the horses must be saved for the return journey—through the silver-bright summer night to Peterhof, the other conspirators parted quietly. The Dashkov remained at home, distressed, excited, and chafing under her enforced inactivity. Panin returned to the Summer Palace where the Czarevitch was, and slept soundly until the tumult of the revolution wakened him. Orlov hurried off to inform Rasumovsky that Passek had been arrested and Alexis had gone to Peterhof to warn the Empress. Rasumovsky listened in silence, and made no comment, but as soon as Orlov had left he sent for his adjutant, Taubert, and ordered him to have the manifesto announcing the revolution printed that same night in one of the subterranean crypts. Taubert begged to be excused from this dangerous task. "You already know too much," Rasumovsky replied. "Now your own head is at stake. Do as I tell you." Meanwhile Gregory Orlov had gone off to the barracks where the Ismaelov regiment was quartered.

It was situated on the outskirts of the city, and would be the first Catherine would pass on her way from Peterhof. Here Orlov came face to face with the spy, Perfilev; he sat down with him at the card tables, promptly lost three thousand roubles, called for more wine, and finally, at four in the morning, sent the completely fuddled spy off to bed. Only then could he begin to make preparations for Catherine's arrival. These were almost too simple to be believed—they consisted in promising a barrel of brandy to a few dozen soldiers, and holding a conversation with the regimental priest, Father Alexis. But that is neither here nor there.

Now at last everything was happening as Catherine had wished. She was lying fast asleep when Fate itself, in the person of Alexis Orlov, knocked at her door at five o'clock in the morning. The tiny pavilion of Monplaisir which Catherine occupied at Peterhof was not guarded; the Empress's devoted waiting-woman, Chagorodsky, seeing the familiar figure of an officer, opened the door and allowed him to enter without a word. In the dressing-room the festival dress which Catherine was to wear for the celebration of Peter's name-day was laid out ready for her to put on.

Alexis Orlov was only half as handsome as his brother: that is to say, the right side of his face was fair as an angel's, but the left side was like a devil's mask. He had been wounded by a sabre cut in a duel, the scar had healed badly, and his upper lip was drawn back in a perpetual satanic grin. But this disfigurement, far from worrying him, only inspired him to rival his brothers and all his comrades in deeds of courage, daring, and recklessness.

He stepped unceremoniously to the bedside of the sleeping Empress and wakened her with the words: "It is time to get up, the carriage is waiting and everything is prepared in the city."

Catherine asked what had happened.

"Passek has been arrested."

Now everything was just as she had hoped. Her friends had acted for her, unasked, but according to her wishes; they

had done something which could not be undone, one of their number had been arrested, all of them were in danger. There was no longer any question of making a voluntary decision, of declaring herself as the rival of her husband, the rightful Emperor of Russia; the decision now lay between submitting to her own destruction and that of her friends and all true Russian patriots—and fighting. It was a question of immediate and necessary self-defence. Now, as a desperate woman in danger of her life, she could appeal to the Russian people for help. In a situation such as this she could show the courage, the shrewdness, the determination of ten men.

It took her only a few minutes to dress. She put on her simplest black mourning gown, and since her hairdresser did not arrive at Peterhof until seven, hastily put up her hair with a few pins. The garden was deserted, everyone was still asleep, she walked unobserved across the damp gravel to the waiting carriage. She was accompanied only by the two young officers and her waiting-woman, Chargorodsky. Orlov sat beside the driver encouraging him to whip the last ounce of strength from the exhausted horses; the whip cracked and the shabby carriage swept at a sharp pace over the country road. The silver Russian night had turned to the golden light of a brilliant summer dawn. A few isolated vehicles passed them on the road—no one recognized this simply clad woman driving in a *calèche* drawn by hired horses as the Empress. The carriage was far shabbier than the one in which, twenty years before, she had travelled through Prussia and Pomerania on her way to Russia; her retinue and her luggage were even scantier, she had nothing with her save the dress she was wearing. If her *coup* failed, the best she could do for herself would be to fly to Sweden, a beggar.

A few miles from Petersburg they were met by Gregory Orlov, and Catherine changed carriages in order to proceed more quickly with his fresher horses. Towards eight o'clock they reached the barracks of the Ismaelov regiment on the outskirts of the city. Here they halted. Orlov got out and went into the guard-room while Catherine waited in the

carriage outside. The drummer sounded a roll, and immediately a few dozen soldiers and a handful of officers appeared in the streets, the soldiers still tousled with sleep and only half dressed. Catherine stepped from the carriage, went up to the straggling group, and said:

"I have come to you for protection. The Emperor has given orders to arrest me, he intends to kill me and my son."

The soldiers had never seen the Empress at close range before. They had a clear picture of her personality painted for their simple soldier hearts by the simple soldier mentality of the Orlovs. It was the picture of a *Matushka*, a Little Mother, a woman who, though she sat upon the throne of Russia, had a place in her heart for all soldiers, but more particularly for the most Russian of soldiers—the Guards. Many of these men had at one time or another accepted money from the Orlovs in Catherine's name, and every one of them had been mortally offended by Peter's preference for the foreign regiments. Now this woman, this Little Mother, was standing among them in her simple black gown with her dark hair in disorder, yet beautiful enough to please any man, calm and dignified even though she knew the assassins to be close on her heels, a defenceless, persecuted woman queenly in her dignity, a woman fashioned from the top of her head to her heels to be loved and honoured by the people. Love for Catherine, hatred of Peter, masculine gallantry and soldierly aggressiveness combined to wring a hoarse cry from their throats:

"Hurrah! Long live our Little Mother Catherine!"

The spark had caught. They were only a handful of soldiers but they were wild with enthusiasm. They kissed Catherine's hands, her feet, the hem of her dress. And while they were swearing to protect her with their blood and their lives against all enemies, even against the Czar himself, Father Alexis appeared suddenly in their midst with a raised crucifix, accompanied by the Colonel of the regiment, Count Cyril Rasumovsky. It was the work of a second: there, under the open sky, on the rough ground of the barrack-yard, Catherine was proclaimed "sole ruler of Russia" by a handful of dis-

hevelled, half-dressed soldiers. This was all the preparation the Orlovs had made. What might follow was left to two vastly more powerful forces: the will of the people, and chance.

Further on lay the barracks of the Semionovsky regiment. Here, too, they hoped to meet with a similar wave of enthusiasm, and to add to the number of their supporters. Catherine returned to her shabby carriage, Rasumovsky and Orlov rode beside her, Father Alexis, with his crucifix, walked ahead, and they were followed by a rabble of excited soldiers. It was by no means an impressive procession, yet it was sufficiently large to attract attention. A few officers had ridden on ahead to warn the Semionovsky Guards of Catherine's approach. Before the Empress reached the building, jubilant hordes came running to meet her, likewise only half-dressed, in shirt-sleeves, without caps, but all armed to the teeth, shouting and gesticulating with joy. There and then in the middle of the street they swore an oath of allegiance to their new ruler, and added their numbers to those of the Ismaelovs. At the head of the two regiments, between a double row of onlookers who had come to gape at this curious procession without understanding its significance, Catherine rode slowly towards the Nevsky Prospect.

There was some confusion among the ranks of the Preobrazhensky regiment. When the news of Catherine's entry to the city had reached them at eight o'clock that morning, a number of officers had attempted to maintain order. Peter had always showed a preference for this regiment, particularly for the Grenadiers, who were commanded by his mistress's brother, the young Count Vorontzov. Vorontzov and Major Voizokov harangued the soldiers, reminding them of the oath they had sworn to the Emperor. In close-pressed ranks the Preobrazhensky regiment marched against the rebels, and the two columns collided in the Nevsky Prospect.

It was the turning point of the revolution. If there was any fighting the outcome was uncertain, and even if Catherine's party were victorious she would have been the cause of blood-

shed; the first fine frenzy of enthusiasm would be clouded by sorrow and distress. But before the first shot was fired, a voice—it was that of Count Menshikov—shouted from the ranks of the Preobrazhenskies: "Hurrah! Our Little Mother, the Empress of Russia!" Immediately the whole regiment took up the cry as one man, the soldiers arrested their officers on the spot and begged the Empress's forgiveness for having hesitated to join her at once.

The whole city was roused by this time. People rushed from their houses into the streets and mingled with the soldiers to witness the strange happenings, filled with enthusiasm, or catching their enthusiasm from the others. The procession made slow progress through the crowds, but news of its advance sped like lightning through the alleys and byways, passed from mouth to mouth, from house to house. Excited spectators of all ages and sexes, with their garments hastily flung on, hurried from the furthest outlying districts; many of them were only vaguely aware, others totally ignorant of the cause of the excitement, but they heard shouting and so they too began to shout, they heard cheering and they too cheered, the procession grew longer, denser, more exultant at every step. The accumulated discontent of the past few months, the electric tension of the last few days when uncertainty had hung heavily in the air, the people's need to love someone and find an emotional outlet for their patriotism, were all expressed in a wild abandonment to enthusiasm that reached its climax when the Horse Guards, fully armed and in perfect military discipline, rode up behind their officers and surpassed every other regiment in their display of fanatical loyalty.

Strangely enough it was Gregory Orlov's regiment, the Guards' artillery, that showed signs of insubordination, the soldiers demanding to be informed of General Villebois' orders before they acted. For some unknown reason—various biographers have attributed it to jealousy—Orlov had not taken Villebois into his confidence. Catherine, waiting outside the barracks, sent for the General, who when he appeared proceeded to explain to her the dangers of her undertaking.

"I did not send for you to give me advice," Catherine said, "but to find out what you propose to do."

"To follow you," Villebois replied, falling on his knees. Thereupon he took the oath of allegiance and handed over the keys of the arsenal to Catherine.

At nine o'clock the procession finally reached the Kazan Cathedral, the church was already full, and it was here that Panin arrived with the little Paul Petrovitch. In the general hurry and confusion they had forgotten to take off the child's nightcap. The priest blessed Catherine with the cross and she took her oath as Empress and Autocrat of Russia. Neither the sleepy-eyed Czarevitch nor his tutor, Panin, could raise any protest: the deed had been accomplished.

From the Kazan Cathedral the procession made its way to the Winter Palace. Less than an hour before Catherine had been a woman fleeing to Petersburg in danger of her life, in a shabby carriage, attended only by a waiting-woman and two officers. True, she still occupied the same unpretentious carriage, with Orlov and General Villebois standing on the running boards, but now she was preceded by priests in their full vestments while thousands of soldiers, thousands of townspeople followed behind. The air was full of the sound of pealing bells, progress was slow, for everyone wanted to peer into the carriage, to see the Empress, to wish her happiness, to win a word, a smile from her. It was ten o'clock before they arrived at the Winter Palace, where the Senate was already assembled.

As Catherine was stepping out of the carriage to enter the palace, the Dashkov arrived. She had come most of the way on foot, forcing her way with difficulty through the throng, but at last she was recognized by some officers, who lifted her in their arms and passed her from hand to hand over the heads of the crowd till she found herself standing safely on the steps of the palace, able to hail Catherine with a cry of "Heaven be praised!" as she fell upon her neck. After this Catherine was overwhelmed with congratulations; the palace doors were thrown open and everyone was allowed to enter freely to greet

the "Little Mother Catherine," just as they had been allowed to pay their last respects to the "Little Mother Elizabeth." Meanwhile the manifesto which had been printed overnight was being distributed among the masses. It was worded:

WE, by the Grace of God, Catherine II, Empress and Autocrat of all the Russias, etc. . . .

All true sons of the Russian Fatherland have clearly recognized the danger that threatened the Russian Empire. The safety of our Orthodox Greek Church has been imperilled by the disregard for ecclesiastic traditions, so that our orthodox Church was exposed to the danger of being obliged to adopt another confession. Secondly, our glorious Russia has been cheated of the prize won at the cost of so much bloodshed and has been placed under the bitter yoke of its age-old enemy for the sake of an ignominious peace. At the same time the inner organization of the country, on which the unity and welfare of the Fatherland depends, lies in ruins. Therefore, because we are convinced of the danger to our faithful subjects, we have seen ourselves obliged, with the help of God and His Justice, and encouraged by the clear and unfeigned wish of our faithful subjects, to ascend the throne as Autocrat of all the Russias, whereupon all our faithful subjects have taken the solemn oath of allegiance.

CATHERINE.

This manifesto had been prepared in advance, and was doubtless worded by Catherine herself, or at any rate in accordance with her instructions. Brief and concise as it was, it contained a very definite and extensive programme in the place of the usual fine phrases. It dealt with the two main points on which Peter had offended the religious and national susceptibilities of the Russians; it pacified the clergy, flattered the army, gave new hope to Russia's former allies, and revealed the Empress as the grateful instrument of the people's will. It was the final crystallization of twenty years of unremitting effort: Catherine had succeeded in making the Russian people believe that she—a pure German by blood—was the sole champion of their national interests, despite the fact that no

less than three male descendants of the house of Romanoff were alive in Russia, Peter, the Czarevitch Paul, and Ivan, who had been crowned as a baby.

Towards midday the first batch of regular army troops joined the Guards. More than ten thousand soldiers had gathered in the great square outside the Palace and in the streets leading up to it, giving them the appearance of a vast military encampment. The whole town was out and about, eager to pay homage to the new Empress. A hearse had been seen in one of the side-streets, and the rumour spread that Peter III was dead. There were, in consequence, many people who had no inkling that a *coup d'état* had been enacted, but imagined this to be a legitimate succession. It has never been ascertained whether the hearse really contained the body of some unfortunate wretch who had died, or whether it had been procured by Orlov.

The day was hot and sultry, but not one of the vast crowd that had gathered in front of the Palace dreamed of moving from the spot. There was plenty to be seen, plenty of cause for fresh excitement. At twelve o'clock the fathers of the Russian Church appeared, venerable, silver-haired men in full robes, carrying the insignia of power—the crown, sceptre, and holy books—which they were taking to the new Empress. Serene and majestic they strode through the crowds that fell back in awe to make way for them. A very different effect was produced when the chief Quartermaster, entirely on his own initiative, sent for the old Russian uniforms to be brought in large carts from the arsenal, where they were stored, and distributed them to the soldiers. With deafening roars of joy the men tore off the hated Prussian tunics, trampled the Prussian caps in the dust, and put on their old uniforms.

At one o'clock the Palace doors were closed to the public. Catherine and the Senate proceeded to hold a council of state. The burning problem was Peter. As yet no one knew what Peter meant to do, what he could do, what was to be done with him. The last question was clearly the most easily answered: Peter must be forced to abdicate and then

for the time being imprisoned. Immediately after she had arrived at the Winter Palace, when the tumult was at its height, Catherine had given the significant order that the Kalinka Bridge was to be closed and no one was to be allowed to enter the city from that direction. The only road from Oranienbaum to Petersburg lay across this bridge, and the order was designed to keep Peter as long as possible without news from the capital. It had been planned that Peter was to go to Peterhof during the afternoon to attend the celebrations in honour of his name-day; when he arrived he would find the Palace deserted, and would realize what had happened. What would he do? He might proceed to Livland where the major part of the Russian army was stationed in readiness for its departure to Denmark. These troops, which had not yet sworn allegiance to Catherine, represented a very serious danger to the new government. An equally grave peril threatened from the coast, in the event of Peter proceeding to Kronstadt and advancing on the capital down the Neva by boat.

Measures were accordingly taken to minimize both these dangers. At three o'clock a courier was despatched to the Governor-General of Riga—the same General Braun, who, twenty years before, had met the little German Princess at the frontier and given her such useful information about the Russian Court—with the manifesto announcing Catherine's accession to the throne, a list of the new forms of oath, and a ukase requiring him "to accept orders from no one unless signed by Catherine, without first seeing the messenger." Catherine added a sentence in her own handwriting to the effect that "should the former Emperor appear in Livland he is to be arrested at your command and brought dead or alive to Petersburg."

Admiral Talysin himself went to Kronstadt with a note to Commander Nummers, which read:

Admiral Talysin is coming to Kronstadt with our full authorization. Whatever orders he may give are to be carried out.

CATHERINE.

Meanwhile the number of supporters among the army continued to increase. Officers of the Guard galloped to the troops stationed outside the city and won fresh sympathizers for the new government. The excitement in the streets grew wilder; soon a drunken boisterousness was added to patriotic fervour, for the Orlovs had promised the soldiers brandy, and had kept their word. The doors of the wine-shops stood open, the Crown was paying, and frequently more vodka was drunk to the Empress's health than was good for the drinker's own. The Austrian and French envoys bought barrels of brandy and offered free liquor to all those who passed their houses in an effort to cement the old alliance against Prussia. In spite of this liberality there were no acts of violence, except for one incident—the arrest of Prince George of Holstein and the plundering of his house.

At six o'clock Peter's first messenger arrived, in the person of Chancellor Vorontzov. He asked Catherine why she had left Peterhof, and reproached her for this surprise attack. By way of reply Catherine led him to the window, and pointing to the vast excited crowd, said:

"You see, I did nothing, I merely obeyed the wishes of the people!"

She then asked him if he was prepared to take the oath of allegiance, and Vorontzov, with astonishing presence of mind, replied:

"Since I cannot be of service to Your Highness in military undertakings at the moment, and since you must regard me with suspicion on account of my present mission—though I have no intention of opposing Your Highness in any way—I beg you to have me arrested and placed under a guard of your trusted people." In this way he safeguarded himself for any eventuality. He was shortly followed by Prince Trubetsky and Count Shuvalov, who had been sent by Peter to bring the Guards to their senses, and, if necessary, to kill Catherine: in view of the state in which they found the city, bristling with arms and united in a patriotic fervour, they preferred to throw themselves at the feet of the Empress.

No carefully planned and prepared revolution ever met with such swift, easy, and entire success as this amateurish effort which had been carried out so casually, and yet at the moment of execution had found every man at his post playing his part with inspired conviction, as if the whole thing had been organized by some invisible stage manager. The events of that day had been like the steady swelling of a majestic passage of music without a single dissonant note. Though Catherine retained her self-possession throughout, remembering the most trivial details in midst of the greatest confusion, finding time to bestow friendly greetings, thanks and recognition where they were due, she was deeply moved by this display of devotion from the people. She had reached the height of her glory, she was on the crest of the wave. One thing only was lacking to make this vast and beloved Russia completely hers in the eyes of the world, and that was Peter's dethronement. This glorious, shining, pulsating summer's day was not to end with a cold ukase, but with a drama more heroic even than the morning's triumphal entry into the city.

At ten o'clock she sent a note to the Senate:

Gentlemen and Senators. I go now with the Army to secure and safeguard the throne, and leave, in the fullest confidence, the Fatherland, the People, and my Son, in your protection as my highest governing authority.

CATHERINE.

Then she dressed herself in a uniform belonging to Count Galitzin—the national uniform of the old Preobrazhensky Guards—and rode round her troops, as a sign that she was taking over the command. "Those who saw Catherine on that evening," writes an apologist for Peter III, "say they had never seen her look so beautiful. It was agreed by all that she was handsomer at that period, when she was already advancing in years, than in youth, which is generally supposed to be the age of perfection in beauty. Mounted on a white dapple horse, combining elegance with confidence in her bearing, her whole aspect was one of incomparable grace."

If an enemy of Catherine's could write thus, what must the enthusiastic and impulsive soldiers have felt?

An incident occurred during this inspection of the troops which was later to be of enormous significance: Catherine suddenly noticed that she had forgotten to put on her sword-knot, and immediately a young officer sprang forward and handed her his own. For the space of a few seconds her eyes rested on the glowing face of a young and handsome man, she heard a strange, unfamiliar name in reply to her question, the next minute the gallant youth had stepped back to his place in the ranks. But Catherine did not forget the small service. Many years later she was to remember that unfamiliar name, which was to be linked forever to her own and that of Russia: the name of Gregory Potiomkin.

At eleven o'clock that night fourteen thousand soldiers left the city and marched towards Peterhof to find the Czar. Catherine rode at their head; green oak leaves were twisted about her soldier's cap, her black hair fluttered loose in the soft summer wind. The Dashkov rode beside her, also in uniform, small and slender as a fifteen-year-old boy.

Dreams and reality, past and present, myth and history wove a fantastic tapestry against the pale, grey silence of the northern night. Faint memories of her infancy stirred in the depths of Catherine's mind; what she was experiencing at this moment was the materialization of her earliest dreams. She was riding a horse just like a man but greater than any man in Russia, she was advancing upon the man-enemy, the man who by virtue of his birth and sex, not because of any merit of his own, called himself her legitimate master, and behind her, ready to obey her orders, rode a powerful army of men. Something, too, was stirring in the subconscious minds of the men who, drunk with enthusiasm and wine, followed this magnificent and fearless woman, their Little Mother, their Great Mother—a vague, atavistic memory which they could not put into words, yet which held them spellbound. These men, half barbarian, half Christian, were riding out to make history, as their fathers had done before them.

Peter had slept soundly throughout the early morning hours while he was being overthrown. A few hours' drive from the scene of the revolution the whole Court, including Chancellor Vorontzov, had been enjoying themselves in ignorance of the events which were taking place in the capital. Everything was as usual at Oranienbaum on the twenty-eighth of June. Peter rose late, having drunk a great deal the evening before, attended a parade of his Holstein soldiers at eleven, sat down to eat, and shortly before two o'clock set off for Peterhof with his household. The Prussian ambassador, Goltz, the aged General Münnich, Vorontzov, Shuvalov, Trubetsky, and about twenty ladies including the buxom Elizabeth Vorontzov, were in the party. They drove in a *linega*, a spacious carriage affording room for a large number of passengers sitting back to back. It was a boisterous journey. The Czar was wearing his Prussian uniform, the ladies were in gala costume and protected their delicate skins from the fierce heat of the June sun with little parasols.

Lieutenant Godovitch galloped on ahead. When he arrived at Peterhof he was met by pale-faced, bewildered servants and agitated ladies-in-waiting, but found no kind of preparation for the Emperor's reception.

"What has happened?" he demanded.

"The Empress has been missing since early this morning."

"Where is she?"

No one had any idea.

Godovitch rode back and met the Imperial carriage in the forest, about three hundred yards from the Palace. The gay company was alarmed by this news as a farmer might be disquieted by the appearance of a hailstorm on the horizon. The Emperor refused at first to believe that his wife had disappeared. He asked the ladies to leave the carriage and drove on hurriedly to the Palace, ran from room to room, opened all the cupboards, looked under the beds and even under the mattresses, shouting Catherine's name. By the time he finally abandoned this useless search, the ladies had arrived on foot through the park.

"Haven't I always told you?" he cried to his mistress. "That woman is capable of anything."

A few minutes later a panting, perspiring messenger arrived at the Palace; it was a Holstein soldier disguised as a peasant, who had left the city at ten o'clock that morning to bring news of the riots to the Czar; he had crossed the Kalinka Bridge a few minutes before it was closed.

"Now you see that I am right," Peter said. "She is capable of anything." No one disputed this triumph of psychology in the hour of his downfall. The ladies screamed and wept and exclaimed in horror at Catherine's perfidy, the men discussed what had best be done. Town riots, a mutiny of the discontented Guards, a surprise attack by the discontented Catherine—all this was surprising and alarming enough news, but no reason why the Czar should tremble for his throne. The sunny garden, usually so tranquil, buzzed with excited comment, suggestions and advice.

"Go to Petersburg at the head of a body of picked men, and show yourself to the Guards," General Münnich advised. "Remind the rioters of their oath to you, promise whatever they ask. No one will dare to lay a finger on the sacred person of Your Majesty. Remember that Peter the Great once saved his crown in similar circumstances by making a public appearance."

But Peter III was not Peter the Great. Münnich's suggestion did not appeal to him in the least. He had no faith whatever in the postulated effect of his appearance among the rioters. The moment he was obliged to defend himself it became obvious that no inner vocation but merely an accident of birth had made him the ruler of a nation. The false confidence of the last exhilarating few months dropped from him, revealing his profound secret terror of this alien race, and his innate fear at being in a position he could never hope to justify.

"I don't trust the Empress," he whimpered. "She would stand by and watch them insult me."

His friends felt that he had already abandoned all hope for his own cause. The more quick-witted thought of plausible

excuses for leaving him. Vorontzov left for Petersburg "to talk seriously to Catherine," Shuvalov departed with the object of "bringing the Guards to their senses," Trubetsky in the last instance "to kill Catherine." Since Peter was in no fit state to make any serious decision, he made a hundred senseless ones instead. He despatched orderlies in all directions to gather fresh news from the capital, and sent messengers to the various regiments ordering them to proceed to Peterhof at once. He sent a message to Commandant Nummers at Kronstadt ordering him to send three thousand soldiers to Peterhof by boat. Four secretaries leant on the iron balustrade of the balcony taking down all the ukases that Peter issued in the course of an hour. Most of them were manifestos against Catherine, bristling with insults. Guards had been posted in all the avenues leading to the palace waiting for news from Petersburg. But no news came. The anxiety grew: if the revolt had been suppressed surely the Czar would have been informed at once.

Once again the aged Münnich came forward with a suggestion, namely, that Peter should proceed at once to Kronstadt where he would be certain of protection and safety, and where above all he would be able to gain time. Had Peter taken this advice, his own fate and the whole course of Russian history might have been different. If he had gone straight to Kronstadt—it was then four o'clock in the afternoon—he would have anticipated Admiral Talysin, and have been received as Emperor; the entire fleet would have been in his hands, he might have communicated with the troops in Livland and advanced against the revolutionaries in Petersburg by land as well as by water. But Peter hesitated. He could not make up his mind. He wanted to gain time, to avoid making any decision, and so he lost the one possible chance of saving himself. He sent two officers, Deviers and Bariatinsky, to Kronstadt to cancel his orders concerning the three thousand soldiers, and to ask Nummers whether the town was prepared for his reception. At the same time he summoned his Holstein Guards from Oranienbaum, instructing them to bring their

cannons with them. These two orders achieved nothing but to furnish an excuse for a few more hours of delay.

The hot June sun was less overpowering in the park at Peterhof than in the town. It was a glorious summer's day. Since there was nothing to do but wait, the ladies and gentlemen strolled in the shade of the great trees, flirted and joked, and when evening came supper was brought out on to the lawn and everyone drank more than was good for them. No fresh news came from Petersburg to disturb them: in fact no news came at all. Of all the messengers who had been sent out not a single one returned.

As supper was being cleared away, the Holstein Guards arrived. In their smart uniforms, with their buttons gleaming, they marched in Prussian goose-step up the drive, and Peter's heart swelled with the old enthusiasm. He could once more play the game he liked best in the world, and in his enjoyment of it forgot that it had ceased to be a game. He stationed the soldiers at various points in the grounds, then reconnoitred the surrounding slopes to select the best positions for the cannons. For several hours no one dared tell the Czar that the dashing Holsteiners had no ammunition for their rifles, no balls for their cannons, and that it was hardly suitable for a king to intrench himself in one of his pleasure palaces in anticipation of a siege by his own subjects. At ten o'clock Bariatinsky returned from Kronstadt and reported that the town was ready for the Czar's reception. The gentlemen of Peter's household, who had long since realized the folly of attempting to offer any resistance at Peterhof, and who had already given themselves up for lost, crowded round Peter and assured him in chorus that he had no choice: Kronstadt was their last and only hope.

A galley and a yacht were brought up, and at eleven o'clock they set sail for Kronstadt. Even at this stage there was considerable delay: much time was wasted in getting the ladies in their elaborate costumes on board the galley, and in transporting the kitchens and the wine-cellar to the yacht. But it made little difference, for, soon after Bariatinsky had left

Kronstadt with the reassuring news, Admiral Talysin arrived, and when he presented his credentials from Catherine it turned out that Nummers was an old enemy of the Holsteiners. In spite of the lateness of the hour the entire garrison as well as the crews of all the ships lying at anchor in the harbour were called out and made to take the oath of allegiance to Catherine. After that the harbour chains were lowered and the port closed to all craft.

It was one o'clock in the morning when the Imperial vessels reached Kronstadt and cast anchor just outside the harbour. The watchman on the bastion called out: "Who's there?"

A boat was lowered from the galley, and rowed within earshot, and a request made that the harbour entrance be opened. The watchman refused "with threats." No one in the galley had any suspicion of what had happened in Kronstadt after Bariatinsky's departure; they all believed that the harbour had been closed to protect the Czar against a possible attack from the revolutionaries. Peter himself shouted:

"It is I—the Emperor!"

"There is no Emperor! Move off or we fire!" came the answer.

At the same moment the alarm was sounded in the fortress. There could be no more possible doubt, the only thing to do was to hurry as quickly as possible out of range of the harbour cannons. The sailors pulled with all their might, in the general confusion the anchor chain of the yacht broke, and as they fled not knowing what direction to take, a thousand voices rose from the fortress behind them in a shout of: "Long live Catherine II!"

Of all the party only Münnich, an old man of eighty-two, kept his sense of dignity and begged the Czar to face this emergency, however unpleasant it might be, as befitted a king. Münnich had lived a colourful life, he had known both success and failure, he had learned the lesson of human fickleness from bitter personal experience; he knew that after bouts of intoxication the head grew clear again, that hope was usually followed by disillusionment. He did not under-estimate the

importance of Catherine's victory, but he knew that of the thousands who were carried away by their wild enthusiasm to-day, half would be disillusioned by to-morrow or the day after, and that the majority always gives its support where power lies. He advised, even begged the Czar to proceed to Reval to join his army, and said:

"I will stake my old head on it that within six weeks at the outside Russia will once more be lying peacefully at your feet."

But Peter, who twenty-four hours before had been eager to attack Denmark for the sake of an insignificant strip of Holstein territory, was incapable of putting up a fight for his own kingdom, for the whole vast empire of Russia. All his life he had played with soldiers, he had wanted to convince himself and others that he was a real man, a hero, a fighter—now fate had shaken him out of his preoccupation with mock warfare, had flung him brutally into the midst of real fighting, and before he had so much as seen a single enemy, he broke down. He was scared, he wanted to run away, he wanted to go home. He implored them to go to Oranienbaum and treat with the Empress. Münnich asked incredulously whether he was not prepared to die at the head of his soldiers like a man and a king? But Peter was deaf to his questions. He had buried his head in the lap of his mistress in the lowermost cabin of the yacht, and had fallen fast asleep.

The galley took its course towards Oranienbaum. It was a cold night on the water, the courtiers and ladies had retired shivering to their cabins. Only Münnich remained on deck gazing resignedly up at the stars. Barely twenty months before he had been recalled from exile in Siberia; it has been a short-lived dream of happiness and power. Quite likely the Empress would have him arrested again to-morrow as a punishment for the advice he had given his young master that day. It had been given in vain. Peter was not the man to follow his advice—if he were, he would not have needed it; he would not have been forced to fight for his crown, for he never would have stood in danger of losing it. It was the law of cause and effect

at work again, eternal and irrevocable as the course of the stars above the venerable white head of the aged General.

With indescribable jubilation the soldiers had marched out of the city with Catherine at their head, but a few hours later the reaction of weariness set in. The men, who had not taken off their clothes since early that morning, and the horses that had been active the whole burning day, were utterly exhausted and in need of rest. At two o'clock in the morning a halt was called at a wretched hostelry at Krasni-Kabak; the soldiers bivouacked in the open fields and cooked their watery soup over camp-fires, the horses were unharnessed and, as far as possible, fed and watered. Catherine and the Dashkov found a tiny room with a single narrow bed on which they lay down, fully clothed, to snatch some rest. But they could not sleep, so they occupied themselves by drawing up further manifestos.

The advance-guard, under Alexis Orlov, had gone on ahead and reached Peterhof at five o'clock; they found the place deserted, and proceeded without dismounting to Oranienbaum. On the road they encountered a large company of Holsteiners who, knowing nothing of what had happened, were going through their customary morning drill with wooden muskets. It was the work of a few minutes for Orlov's Hussars to run them down, snap their wooden muskets, and imprison the men in neighbouring barns and sheds. Then the advance guard rode on, arrived at Oranienbaum a little after six, and posted themselves at all the doors and entrances without having to fire a single shot. Peter, terrified for his life, had given orders immediately on reaching Oranienbaum that no resistance was to be offered, and that all barricades and military defences were to be torn down.

He had already written a letter to Catherine which he sent by the hand of the Vice-Chancellor, Prince Galitzin, to intercept her. In it he begged forgiveness for all his many mistakes, promised to reform, and begged Catherine to partake with him in the government of the country. Galitzin met the Empress approximately at the time when Alexis Orlov was entering

Oranienbaum: she had resumed her march again at five o'clock that morning. She deemed Peter's letter unworthy of a reply, commanded Galitzin to swear the oath of allegiance, and took him along with her. At ten o'clock she arrived with her army at Peterhof. Exactly thirty-six hours had elapsed since her secret departure from there in the shabby hired carriage.

The entry of Orlov's Hussars to Oranienbaum had doubled Peter's terror. By ten o'clock he had realized that Galitzin would not return and that Catherine had rejected his proposals. He now sent General Ismaelov with a second letter, in which he renounced the throne and begged to be allowed to return to Holstein with his mistress.

It was a modest and without doubt a sincere request. Catherine knew her husband far too well to doubt that in his heart he desired nothing more than to be allowed to spend his remaining days as the Duke of Holstein, peacefully playing at soldiers in the barracks yard. She was neither vindictive, spiteful, nor cruel—she had proved this on innumerable other occasions. As a wife and a woman she would never have dreamed of grudging Peter a peaceful end to his days in Holstein, but as the Empress of Russia she dared not leave the dethroned Czar as a possible political pawn in the problematic field of the future. Elizabeth, twenty years before, had not even dared to send the Brunswick family back to their home—and Elizabeth had been a daughter of Peter the Great! Catherine knew that she could only reign in peace and security so long as Peter was safely immured somewhere within the country.

But before Peter could be immured he must be caught, and for the moment he was surrounded by fifteen hundred stalwart Holsteiners, who might of course be overpowered, but not without considerable loss of life, and Catherine wished to accomplish her revolution without bloodshed. She confided this difficulty to General Ismaelov.

"Your Majesty," Peter's envoy replied, "do you regard me as an honourable man?" Catherine admitted that she did. "Then I give you my word that if you release me I will bring

the Czar to you quite alone, he will sign anything you wish, and I shall have saved my country from civil war."

Ismaelov was not altogether honest: he was certainly capable of doing what he had promised, but he knew perfectly well that he was exaggerating his services far beyond their value. He knew the Holsteiners had no ammunition, that they had been forbidden to offer any resistance, and that Peter was in a state of mind which would make him agree to anything. Catherine believed him: she was quite sure the General was "honourably" prepared to betray his master, and agreed that he should undertake the mission, but she sent Gregory Orlov to accompany him. And to spare the harassed Peter any trouble over the wording of his "voluntary abdication," she herself prepared the draft which Peter presently copied out and signed without a murmur of protest. It read:

In the short period of my reign as Autocrat of the Russian Empire I have realized its hardship and burdens, to which my powers are not equal, so that neither as Autocrat nor in any other way can I rule the Russian Empire. Thus I perceived that inward changes were leading to the destruction of its safety and would necessarily bring lasting disgrace on me. I have therefore taken counsel with myself and herewith solemnly declare before the Russian Empire and the whole world, that I voluntarily and without compulsion renounce the sovereignty of the Russian Empire for my whole life. I will never reign over this country as Autocrat or in any other way, and I will never myself nor with anyone's help attempt to do so. I swear this sincerely and without hypocrisy, before God and the whole world. This entire abdication has been written and signed by my own hand.

PETER.

When he had copied out and signed this humiliating declaration, Peter allowed himself to be conducted to a carriage without protest and driven to Peterhof. His adjutant, Godovitch, and Elizabeth Vorontzov accompanied him. The road from Oranienbaum to Peterhof was closely lined with soldiers. And

now the ugly side of the previous day's inspired patriotism was revealed. A hail of insults was rained on the broken, wretched, and defenceless man, and when he stepped from his carriage outside the palace at Peterhof he was deafened by shouts of "Long live Catherine II!" Without a word Peter handed his dagger to the officer on duty. He was taken to the rooms which he had occupied as Grand Duke. Here his Order of St. Andrew was removed; in the presence of the grinning, jeering soldiers he was made to take off his uniform, and before he could put on the civilian clothes that had been laid out ready for him the brutal malice of uncontrolled plebeian scorn had time to wreak itself on the figure of a disgraced and dishonoured Emperor. Presently Panin appeared to discuss final details with him. "I regard it as the greatest misfortune of my life," the honest Panin wrote years later, "that I was forced to see Peter on this day." The deposed Czar fell on his knees before his son's tutor, tried to kiss his hands, and wept like a child. Elizabeth Vorontzov, too, had thrown herself on her knees and begged to be allowed to remain with her lover. By her desire to share the fate of the wretched Peter she atoned for many past sins and gave the lie to all those who said that her affection for him was based solely on ambition. But her prayers were in vain. "Peter asked me for his mistress, his dog, his negro, and his violin," Catherine wrote to Poniatovsky some weeks later, "but in order to avoid a scandal and prevent increasing the excitement of his guards, I only sent him the last three." This was not a very convincing explanation, and the question of why Catherine, in the full flush of victory, should have refused the modest and very understandable wish of her unhappy husband for the company of his mistress, is a delicate one: it touches on the problem of Peter's grim end.

At five o'clock that afternoon a closely-curtained carriage left the Palace. Armed grenadiers stood on the running boards, on the step behind, and beside the driver. Inside sat Peter in the custody of four officers, one of whom was Alexis Orlov. They were bound for Ropsha, a small estate beyond Petersburg,

where Peter was to spend a few days until suitable accommodation had been prepared for him in the fortress of Schlüsselburg.

"He allowed himself to be deposed like a child being sent to bed," remarked Frederick II, the man whom Peter had worshipped as his god.

The purpose of the march to Peterhof had been achieved, the revolution was accomplished. For the first time in two strenuous days Catherine was able to sit down to a proper meal. A small table had been set for three in her private apartments—for herself, the Countess Dashkov, and Gregory Orlov. But this meal, shared by the heroine of the day with her two chief confederates, was not a very cheerful one. The little Dashkov was in an exceedingly ill humour. A few minutes before the Empress's entrance she had had high words with Orlov. She had come in and found him sprawling on the sofa busy opening a bundle of letters, which the Chancellor's niece immediately recognized as being official documents.

"How dare you open those letters?" she demanded indignantly. "They must remain sealed until the Empress has appointed a ministry to deal with the affairs of state."

Without getting up or interrupting his occupation, Gregory replied: "The Empress asked me to open them." And then Catherine came in, while the Dashkov was still fuming with outraged fury. Far from rebuking Orlov for his action or his careless manners, the Empress ordered the dinner-table to be moved up to the sofa so that the young officer could remain lounging comfortably in his seat. She explained this delicate attention by saying that Orlov had strained a muscle in his leg.

"At that moment," the Countess Dashkov writes in her *Memoirs*, "I realized with unspeakable pain and humiliation, that a liaison existed between the two." This remark is almost comic in its ingenuousness, and it does not ring quite true. It was not the thought that her adored friend was subject to human frailty, that she had taken this uneducated lout of

a soldier to be her lover, which caused the Dashkov such unspeakable pain, it was the realization that, as Catherine's lover, Orlov had played a very different and more important part in the revolution than it had been considered expedient to let her know. Twenty-four hours ago she had been the happiest woman in Russia because she had believed that Russia owed its deliverance mainly to herself—to-day she was the first to be disillusioned under the new government.

Catherine was perfectly aware of this. She did her best to cheer her unhappy friend, overwhelming her with flattery and gratitude, and at the same time trying to keep her big, exacting lover in a good humour, but she herself was in a state of high nervous tension, distressed by the thought of the harsh measures she had been forced to take against her husband. Peter had wept when Panin went in to him, and had kissed his hands! It was odious and unmanly, but at the same time moving, horrible, and the thought of it weighed heavily on Catherine's conscience. Yet she must hide her anguish, must appear gay and happy so that the happiness of these two, to whom she owed a debt of gratitude, should not be spoiled. It is an inexorable law that a return must be made for everything that is given: the body is reclaimed by the earth, the soul by God, and power—power is reclaimed piecemeal by every instrument, great and small, that has helped to build it up.

This was no time for philosophical reflections, but Catherine, conscious of an inexplicable depression, a sudden slackening of her nervous energy, knew that she had passed the zenith of her life. She had touched that yesterday when, with oak leaves in her hair, she had ridden at the head of her impassioned troops through the pale northern night. Now the Czar was deposed, the enemy captured, she was ruler of countless thousands; the final step from wish to realization was accomplished. Her dreams, plans, the violent suspense of preparation, all that meant youth, lay behind her. Ahead lay the herculean task of fulfilment. The little Dashkov's ill-humour was only a faint jarring note, but it constituted a symptom. Forty million dissatisfied Russians and Catherine's own high in-

dividual standard demanded that she should keep the promise she had made to herself and the others, should translate into stern reality what had been offered in easy dreams. It was all very well for Voltaire and Montesquieu: in the rarified atmosphere of abstract philosophy ideals could flourish freely, but an Empress was confronted at every step by solid material obstacles, and by the sturdy egotism of each one of her subjects. The Dashkov did not realize this, she would never understand such things, but Catherine realized it at this first unsuccessful celebration with her lover and her friend. All those who had helped her to power would make some claim upon her; inch by inch she would be forced to abandon her high ideals in order to compromise with practical demands.

"The least soldier of the Guard thinks when he sees me that this is the work of my hands," she wrote to Poniatovsky a few days later. Her entry to Petersburg on the thirtieth of June (again she had spent almost the whole of the previous night in the saddle) had been a triumph. It was a Sunday, the whole town had turned out to receive her, the townsfolk were dressed in their best clothes and carried branches of oak, all the regiments were parading the streets with music, bells pealed in all the churches. As a reward for their efforts of the last two days, the soldiers were supplied with free wine, they carried the precious liquid home in jugs and caps, and by evening the whole town was in an uproar. At eleven, just when she had gone to bed, Catherine was woken by Captain Passek, who had come to tell her that the Ismaelov Guards had collected in front of the palace and were loudly demanding to see the Empress. A drunken Hussar had spread the rumour that thirty thousand Prussians were advancing to dethrone Catherine, and the men were insisting, with drunken obstinacy, on seeing their Little Mother, and neither Passek nor the Orlovs could bring them to reason. There was nothing for it but to get up, dress, drive off to the Ismaelov barracks and assure the soldiers that she was in the best of health but badly in need of sleep. "And in future I wish you to obey your

officers," she added. The soldiers begged for forgiveness, and explained that they had been badly alarmed on the Empress's account. "We are all ready to die for you, Little Mother." "Good," said Catherine. "I thank you, but now go to sleep and allow me to do the same."

This incident, too, was symptomatic. Already a return was being demanded for love and enthusiasm, and the Empress, whom the will of the people had appointed to rule them, stood in danger of becoming a slave to the people. The wild excitement of the last few days had wiped out the finer distinctions; Catherine had, in a manner of speaking, become the mistress of the whole nation, and she realized that if she was to maintain her authority the people must learn to forget that she owed her victory to them. A Monday must follow Sunday, workdays succeed holidays, reverence must take the place of wild excitement and respect be substituted for exacting love. On Monday all the wine shops in the city were closed by order of the police, a number of them were stormed by fanatical and unmanageable revellers, there were a few unpleasant incidents, a few arrests, and more than one over-zealous patriot found himself recovering from the toast he had drunk "to the health of the Little Mother" in a prison cell.

It was obviously impossible to keep all the promises that had been made. Much of what had been said to spur on the half-hearted, to win powerful allies, to inspire and whip up enthusiasm, was privately retracted; a middle course must be steered between gratitude and expediency, a compromise found between the fiery ideals of the rebels and the cold and sober demands that now faced the new head of the government. A great many questions were shelved, many indefinitely. For the present there could be no thought of a state such as Panin or as the Dashkov had dreamed. Panin was entrusted with the task of drawing up a new constitution, but was cautioned not to model his laws too closely on the pattern of Swedish democracy. He was to remember the conditions peculiar to Russia—that is to say, illiteracy and serfdom. Was it reasonable to give a people who had been illiterate slaves since time

immemorial a parliament of their own? First they must be educated, civilized. In this way time could be won—a great deal of time. For the present Catherine undertook the management of state affairs herself, with a thoroughness unknown in Russia since the time of Peter the Great. At first she even dispensed with the services of a Chancellor. The College of Foreign Affairs brought all questions directly to the Empress, and she dealt with them by means of margin notes in her own handwriting. One of these remarks is typical of them all. "It is customary," wrote the College, "that in order to spare the rulers too much unnecessary reading, only extracts from the ministerial reports are submitted, giving a concise précis of the necessary information." Against this Catherine wrote in her large, firm hand: "Complete and detailed reports are, however, to be submitted to me." She made this new rule on the first of July—the second day after her accession.

It was obviously impossible to keep all the promises that had been made. The French and Austrian envoys had every reason to hope for a renewal of the old alliance: apart from any unofficial understanding, the manifesto which Catherine had issued on her succession referred to "an ignominious peace with the age-old enemy." A number of foreign ambassadors were invited to the first official reception on the first July, but the Prussian ambassador, Baron Goltz, begged to be excused because "he had no suitable costume." Meanwhile couriers were riding to all the European capitals with news of the successful *coup d'état*, and with assurances from the new Empress of Russia that it was her desire to live in peaceful harmony with each and every foreign power. A letter to the Russian ambassador in Berlin contained the following sentence: "Concerning the peace lately concluded with His Majesty the King of Prussia, we command you to convey to His Majesty Our solemn intention of upholding the same so long as His Majesty gives Us no cause to break it." The one condition Catherine made was the immediate repatriation of all Russian soldiers still in the war zone. They were to fight neither for nor against Frederick, neither for nor against Maria Theresa;

they were to be sent home. The clause concerning the "ignominious peace with the age-old enemy" had achieved its purpose in the manifesto, but the Empress could not close her eyes to the fact that the country needed peace—whether ignominious or honourable—most urgently. The state coffers were empty, the soldiers had been without pay for eight months. Catherine had no particular liking for Frederick, but she would not allow herself to be influenced by her likes and dislikes, any more than she was influenced by the thought of her moral obligations toward France and Austria: she was concerned with Russia, and Russia alone. On the second of July she was already playing cards with the Baron Goltz.

It was obviously impossible to keep all the promises that had been made. Catherine proved her gratitude to all those who had helped her in the most generous fashion; for three days favours, orders, and presents of money were showered on her friends, but there still remained as many dissatisfied as satisfied people. Everyone tried to claim chief credit for her triumph, everyone felt that his own reward, however great, was insufficient. On the fourth day after Catherine's accession, the old Chamberlain Betsky, who the day before had been presented with the Order of Alexander the Great and three thousand roubles—his part in the revolution had consisted in distributing money to the soldiers at Orlov's instructions—presented himself at the palace. He fell on his knees before the Empress and begged her to admit, in the presence of witnesses, to whom she owed her crown.

"To God and the will of the people," Catherine replied.

At this Betsky tore the beautiful new Order from his breast and cried, with tears in his eyes: "I am the unhappiest of men, for the Empress does not recognize my services. I will not wear this Order so long as Your Majesty refuses to believe that I am the sole instrument of your victory."

Catherine's presence of mind saved her a friend, and Betsky his reason. "I admit that I owe my crown to you," she said. "That is why I wish to receive it from your hands. I now instruct you to see that a crown is made for me and for that

purpose I put all the jewellers in the country at your disposal." Betsky took the joke as a serious request, and departed beaming with satisfaction. But Betsky's behaviour, too, was symptomatic.

Catherine showed herself even more spectacular in her magnanimity to her enemies than in her generosity to her friends; her refusal to exact any of the penalties a conqueror might be expected to impose upon the vanquished is unparalleled in history. Not one of her former enemies was banished or punished in any way. The Holsteiners were all sent back to their homes, and Prince George of Holstein was compensated with a sum of one hundred and fifty thousand roubles for the damage done to his property. After a few days the guards were removed from Chancellor Vorontzov's house, but in spite of the temptation to escape he did not do so. The Empress herself received the aged General Münnich, who had urged Peter so fiercely to oppose her with armed force, and told him that "he had only done his duty." As for Elizabeth Vorontzov, Peter's mistress, who had offered Catherine a hundred insults in the past, and had plotted to take her life and her throne, not a single hair of her head was harmed. She was sent back to her father's house, and later married Prince Pallianski, and Catherine herself acted as god-mother to her first baby. It was in such actions as these more than in anything that Catherine's true majesty showed itself.

This particular characteristic must be kept well in mind when we approach the darkest chapter of her life: Catherine was truly great, she was free from malice, free from cruelty, free from petty spite. She was admittedly ambitious, but even her ambition was noble because it was impersonal. She had long ago identified herself with Russia; from the day she first set foot on Russian soil her love for Russia and her ambition had become inseparable. Russia's greatness was her greatness, Russia's happiness hers, Russia's peace her own peace. She had—contrary to her own assertions—deliberately conspired to usurp the crown, but she had been upheld by her inner conviction that she alone in all the world was capable of wear-

ing that crown for the honour and glory of Russia. It was the responsibilities rather than the glamour of rulership that attracted her. She fully realized the obligations they entailed, and she felt confident of her ability to shoulder them.

Her peace was Russia's peace. . . . But could she be sure of peace so long as Peter was alive? For the present he could barely count on a single supporter. The memory of his follies was still too fresh, and all hopes were fastened on the new Empress. Yet how could she satisfy them all? She knew that it is possible to make a nation happy, but impossible to please all the individuals who make up the nation. The wisest laws, while they benefit hundreds of thousands, must necessarily run counter to the interests of a few. If she allowed things to remain as they were she would offend those who had hoped to gain something by new reforms, and if she made sweeping changes she would offend those who had profited by the old abuses. Whatever she did, she was bound to court disapproval, as the wisest, most perfect of rulers must court it, for the human race is still foolish and imperfect. And since her every move was being watched with tense expectancy, she would be given little time in which to prove herself: in a few years, a few months perhaps, those whose ambitions had remained unsatisfied would begin to blame her, would remind themselves that she had no legitimate claim to the throne—would begin to remember Peter.

Peter on the throne had been a ridiculous figure. Peter imprisoned in the Schlüsselburg was an object of pity. How long would it be before the thought of him roused compassion instead of contempt, and imperfect human memory began to weave a halo, to build a pious legend made up of mingled pity and discontent about his name? How soon would the martyr be transformed into a hero, into the shining hope of those whose ambitions had remained unsatisfied?

These were the perils that threatened Catherine's peace, and that of Russia. They were not discussed, though it was pointed out that the Schlüsselburg was badly situated, being

dangerously near the capital, and ill-suited to withstand an attack even by a comparatively small number of armed men. Someone remarked that it would be a curious coincidence if two Czars were imprisoned in the same fortress—for Ivan, who had since grown to manhood, was still immured in the Schlüsselburg—while a total stranger, a German Princess, sat on the throne of Russia. There was also some talk of “the best of all possible solutions,” which was another way of referring to Peter’s natural death. It was a timely observation, for on the third of July Peter fell ill with a headache and severe colic pains. He had never been robust, and the excitements of the last few days had been very bad for him; he had fainted several times on the journey from Kronstadt to Oranienbaum and during his short stay at Peterhof; was it not conceivable that his delicate constitution, undermined as it was by alcoholic excess, might succumb under the strain? He had asked for his Holstein doctor, Lüders, who was accordingly summoned. But Lüders had no wish to share the imprisonment of his fallen ruler for an indefinite period; he diagnosed the symptoms as harmless and prescribed a purge. Catherine’s star, which had watched over such an incredible series of lucky accidents, was not to grant “the best of all possible solutions.”

She was not the only one to wish for such a solution. All those who had risen with her, who would stand and fall with her—first and foremost the Orlov brothers—desired it as passionately and even more passionately than Catherine. The Orlovs had never wasted much time in thinking, they were simple soldiers and their morals were soldiers’ morals. The only value of a man’s life in their eyes was its value to his country, and for the present Catherine and the country were identical. The Orlovs’ attitude to death was a very straightforward and familiar one: death was never far off, they did not fear it, they attached no great importance to it. To-day you die, to-morrow it may be my turn—there was no point in wasting words on the subject.

Towards evening on the eighth of July a panting messenger

arrived from Ropsha and handed the Empress, who was fortunately attended only by Rasumovsky and Panin, two letters from Alexis Orlov. They were penned on grubby sheets of notepaper in the clumsy handwriting of a soldier, and one who from all appearances was drunk when he wrote. The first letter ran:

Little Mother, Merciful Empress, I do not know how to begin, for I tremble before Your Majesty's anger that you do not believe something awful of us, and that we are not the cause of the death of your rascal, but now the lackey Maslov has fallen ill and he himself is so sick that I do not believe he will live till evening, and he is already quite unconscious, which the whole command knows, and begs God that we shall be rid of him as soon as possible, and this Maslov and the accompanying officer can inform Your Majesty in what condition he is now, if so be that you doubt me. This written by your faithful Servant. . . .

The signature was torn off. In this first letter the drunken Alexis Orlov had obviously made an attempt to conceal the truth, but later he decided to confess everything.

The second letter ran:

Little Mother, Gracious Empress! How shall I explain what has happened? You will not believe your devoted servant, but before God I speak the truth. Little Mother! I am prepared to die, but I myself do not know how the misfortune came about. We are lost if you have no mercy for us. Little Mother! He no longer lives in this world. But no one thought that, and how should we have come to the idea to raise our hands against the Czar? But, Empress, the misfortune has happened! He quarrelled with Prince Feodor at table: we could not separate them, and already he was no more! We ourselves cannot remember what we did, but we are all guilty to the last man and deserve death. Have mercy upon us, if only for my brother's sake! I have made my confession and there is nothing more to investigate. Pardon me, or make an end of me quickly. I no longer wish to see the light of day: we have angered you and our souls are doomed to eternal destruction.

There can be no doubt that these letters were genuine. Only a Dostoevski could, with so few underlinings, have created so vivid a picture of the spiritual panic of a drunken rascal with its typically Russian mixture of animal brutality and superstitious fear, or have invented this primitive outburst of a tortured, guilty heart. The letters were without doubt genuine, and Alexis Orlov's fear of Catherine's anger was equally genuine—so that we must believe she had no part even indirectly in Peter's murder. In any court of law those two sheets of grimy notepaper would be irrefutable proof of her innocence. More than thirty years later, when she was dead, her son Paul found them among her papers, and cried: "Heaven be praised, at last all my doubts are dispelled: my mother was not my father's murderess!"

She did not engineer Peter's death, but she wanted it, she must have wanted it under the circumstances. She desired his death, his natural death, "the best of all possible solutions." But murder . . . ? Though she did not lift a finger to execute this secret wish of hers, is it not conceivable that she played into the hands of fate, providing the opportunity for fate to pursue its own course? She had separated Peter from his mistress, from the only person who had any genuine affection for him. That was one thing. The second was that Peter had been left at Ropsha for over a week, although a courier had been sent to the Schlüsselburg on the twenty-ninth of June, while the revolution was still in progress, to see that suitable accommodation was prepared for the deposed Czar. On the thirtieth of June a second courier had been despatched on the heels of the first with further instructions concerning the furnishing of the rooms, and on the first of July some furniture had actually been delivered for Peter at the fortress. Then six days had gone by in which nothing whatever had been done about the matter of his removal. No word concerning it is to be found in any document in the state archives dated later than the first of July. This is no conclusive evidence; Catherine was so continuously occupied with conferences, receptions, and festivities during these six days, so busy

issuing proclamations, manifestos, and ukases, that it is quite possible she decided to postpone the question of Peter's internment to a later and less busy date. It is a plausible explanation, in spite of the fact that the question was treated with such urgency at first. There can be no doubt, however, that fate had a better opportunity for pursuing its "inscrutable course" at Ropsha than in the well-guarded fortress of Schlüsselburg.

Whatever the truth, even if Catherine remained innocent and unsuspecting right up till the moment she received Alexis Orlov's letter containing the fearful news, she became guilty of complicity when she concealed Peter's murder, denied it, and left it unatoned. What else could she do? The murderer was her lover's brother—that alone was sufficient to throw her woman's heart into dire confusion. She owed her crown principally to the murderer and his brothers—that again presented a grave human problem. But apart from these or any personal considerations, the Orlovs were the most popular figures in the revolution, the prestige of the new government was bound up inextricably with their name. To accuse and punish Alexis Orlov would mean to conjure up doubts concerning the integrity of the revolution's heroes, doubts concerning the revolution and even Catherine herself, and risk plunging the country into fresh disorder, uncertainty, and chaos. The Orlovs stood and fell with Catherine, and Catherine, a week after her victory, stood and fell with the prestige and popularity of the Orlovs. Even apart from any personal considerations, it was politically impossible for Catherine to punish Alexis Orlov.

She needed very little time to arrive at this decision: it throws a dark stain of her ethical conscience but speaks well for her intelligence. Half an hour after receiving the terrible letter she had locked it away in a secret drawer of her writing desk, where it remained until after her death. She was perfectly aware that evil tongues would accuse her of Peter's death, but she concealed the one piece of evidence which would have exonerated her, in order to spare Alexis; she sacrificed her

good name to the demands of the situation, and for the sake of Russia's peace. An hour later she attended an official reception. She was brilliantly animated, spoke graciously to everyone, there was no trace of shadow on her proud and splendid brow: she was great and terrible on that evening, her power, of dissimulation called forth both admiration and horror in those who watched her. Not until the following day, when an official statement was issued to the Senate informing them of Peter's death, did she break down. "My horror at this death is inexpressible," she sobbed on the Dashkov's shoulder; "it is a blow that has struck me to the ground."

The public was informed that "on the seventh day of our reign we received the information to our great sorrow and affliction that it was God's will to end the life of the former Czar Peter III by a severe attack of hæmorrhoidal-colic. We have ordered his mortal remains to be transported to the Nevsky cloister, to be interred there. We conjure all our faithful subjects to bid farewell to his earthly remains without rancour, and to offer up pious prayers for the salvation of his soul." All this was scrupulously performed: the body was taken to the Nevsky cloister and publicly laid out. Sharp and captious eye-witnesses reported that Peter's face was black like that of an apoplectic, they were struck by the fact that his hands crossed on his breast were encased in huge gauntlet gloves and that a broad bandage covered his neck. But the simple people did not notice these details. They pinned their faith to the benevolent words of their Empress and the inscrutable ways of providence.

It was best so, there can be no doubt of that. It was best that the world of reality, the political world, the world of economic necessities should trust its ruler, pursue its business, till its fields, and rear its families in peace and tranquillity. Even from a humane standpoint it must be admitted that Peter's death, even his murder, was a satisfactory solution that saved the country from a probable civil war, sacrificing one life instead of hundreds. Alexis Orlov's arrest would not

have brought Peter back to life, but it might have brought discredit on Catherine's government from the start, restricted her opportunities, and even broken her fine and powerful will. For Catherine and for Russia it was best. But . . .

There is a spiritual as well as a practical world, a world with iron laws of its own, and judged by the standards of this world Catherine was guilty. A murder had been committed—more than that, the cowardly, ugly, stealthy murder of a defenceless prisoner. Not only was the crime left unpunished but titles and favours were heaped upon the murderer and his brothers. In so far as Catherine was an accessory after the fact she had to take the guilt of her husband's murder, whether she had wanted that murder or not, upon herself. But it did not weigh heavily on her conscience. The dead Peter's ghost did not haunt her dreams, it gave her no nightmares, she never regretted it, her soul remained unoppressed by the burden of her guilt. To the day of her death she remained convinced that Russia had benefited by Peter's death and by her own rule. Some years later Gregory Orlov, the rough, brutal soldier, was to start from a nightmare in which he saw the blood-stained corpse of Peter, murdered most probably at his orders by his brother Alexis, and to cover his face with his own excrement in an agony of terror and despair. Catherine died thirty years later with a smile on her lips. Nothing worse and nothing finer can be said of her than this: she took the grim blood-guilt upon her own soul, and her soul was strong enough to carry it to the end.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE RULER

CATHERINE was born to be a ruler, and particularly the ruler of eighteenth-century Russia, that strange, immense kingdom teeming with infinite, unorganized forces in the throes of development. "I love uncivilized countries," she wrote. "As I have said a thousand times: I belong to Russia." But she also loved Europe in the full flower of its contemporary culture and philosophy. Fifty years before, Peter the Great had opened a door facing to the West, and the first breath of western ideas had fanned across the primitive hordes that peopled the Russian steppes, bringing with it much that was good and much that was bad, stimulation and degeneration, civilization and scepticism, new ideas and new confusion. Since that time Russia had become a melting-pot in which the forces of Europe and Asia seethed, mingling and antagonizing each other, germinating and conflicting. Neither Frederick's genius for organization nor Maria Theresa's domestic talents could have created order out of such chaos. But Catherine, whose spirit was as great as Russia itself, who herself was a mixture of elemental forces in the throes of development disciplined by her own intelligence and iron will—Catherine was born to rule this country without oppressing it. Her mentality had become Russian by an act far more intrinsic than the accident of birth on one particular spot of the globe—by the act of love, and a process of steady assimilation that penetrated to the very marrow of her bones.

Yet according to the evidence of her baptism, Catherine was not born to rule Russia. Her claim to the throne lay in her character, not in any hereditary rights. Even after Peter's violent death there still remained two rightful aspirants, the

Grand Duke Paul, and Ivan, the prisoner in the Schlüsselburg. Paul was still a child, and Catherine was the natural regent for the period of his minority, but Ivan constituted a danger. "I am anxious about my Catherine," Voltaire wrote in September, 1762, "and fear that Ivan may dethrone our benefactress." Mercy, too, reported to Vienna that the new government could not be expected to remain in power for long. Objectively viewed, the violent events of the twenty-eighth of June were neither a judgment of God nor a popular rising, but merely a successful *coup d'état*. Catherine was and would always be a usurper.

She felt herself born to be a ruler, and this knowledge gave her the self-confidence which amazed all those about her from the very first moment of her accession. The conviction that she was occupying and justifying her rightful position gave her finer qualities the opportunity they needed to develop fully. She woke each morning at dawn bursting with energy, and worked untiringly for fifteen hours; her far-seeing, practical intelligence seized eagerly on all the material before her, and with amazing rapidity extracted the essential, the kernel, the angle of attack; her natural charm of manner, enhanced by warmth and gaiety, became irresistible. She was kind and considerate, generous and just, a ruler in the true sense of the word, far above selfish ambition and malicious tyranny.

But her innate claim to rulership did not alter the fact that legally she had no right to be on the throne, and this gave her the sense of insecurity which led her to perpetrate a series of regrettable acts of self-assertion. It is unfortunately true that even those who are most favoured by fortune do not get everything for nothing; there is always a price to be paid, and paid, moreover, to the last farthing. It was to be ten years before habit wiped out the memory that Catherine had no hereditary claim to the throne, and, during those ten years, in order to remain in power and to carry through the measures which she considered good, Catherine was forced to do hundreds of things which she and all right-thinking people

must have considered wrong. If, at the end of ten years, she was to be firmly enough intrenched to have the power to realize her youthful ideals, she herself must needs have become a changed woman. The crimes she must commit in the name of the Good would leave an indelible mark on her character and her outlook.

But she began with a desire for the good, with a fervent belief in kindness, justice, and reason; she began as one who had spent decades in preparing herself for the task in hand, but was none the less willing to add to her knowledge, to learn afresh, and, if necessary, sacrifice her own plans to the exigencies of the moment. Therein lay her secret weakness as well as the secret of her success. She had no inner, unassailable convictions with which to fight the world, to mould it to her own ends and impress it with the stamp of her personality; all her ideas were without exception second-hand. But in her struggle to reconcile these ideas with reality she found a hundred inspirations, all of them practical, beneficial and capable of realization. Her ideas came from the West, her inspirations were Russian in their origin. In this she was more independent than any woman who had sat on a throne before her.

When she began her reign she had two able and reliable men at her side: Panin and Bestushev. She had reason to be grateful to both of them, she trusted them both, and frequently appealed to them for advice. But she followed their advice only when it pleased her. Neither succeeded in influencing her on vital questions.

Before he had helped her to depose Peter III, Panin had agreed with Catherine on the necessities of a sound Constitution. The new Empress solemnly entrusted him with the task of preparing a Constitution for Russia. The slow-witted Panin produced his plan with amazing promptness—it had obviously been prepared long in advance. The chief point he made was the appointment of eight "most high imperial counsellors," who could not be dismissed and who,

even in cases of criminal delinquency, could only be tried by a court of their peers. To make his suggestion more acceptable to Catherine, Panin had included the name of Gregory Orlov in the list of candidates for the council of eight. Catherine studied the proposed Constitution with a great show of interest; she suggested a few alterations, returned it for further revision, and it was never mentioned again. It found an honourable grave in the drawer of Panin's writing-desk, which was the best place for it.

This "draft plan" was by no means designed to create a serious parliament with popular representation of the people. Panin's one thought had been to limit Catherine's power to the advantage of the lesser nobility, and to set up an oligarchy on a footing of equality with the Empress. She had no need to fear that she was betraying her youthful ideals, her hotly avowed "republican sympathies," when she decided that, as an absolute monarch who owed her power to the wishes of the people and who respected the people's wishes, she was far better suited to watch over their interests than a permanent clique of ambitious and self-seeking nobles. She attended the meetings of the Senate as an absolute monarch, made her decisions single-handed, and would brook no interference. She enforced her will, a will inspired by the spirit of humanity which at that time still burgeoned fresh and unspoiled in her. For the first time in the history of Russia a ruler gave thought to the "people," and considered "the little man" as more than a mere object for exploitation. Catherine's first measures were directed against the privileged classes: she abolished a large number of private monopolies and the system of farming out taxes, lifted the duty from several important articles of commerce, and forbade the export of wheat in order to bring down the high price of bread in Russia. She still remembered the teachings of Montesquieu. It was his spirit which inspired the fine—though ineffective—manifesto directed against the corruption of officials and the sale of state appointments. She said: "I make no differentiation between my property and that of the state." This, for the time being, meant that she



THE IMPERIAL CROWN



CATHERINE RECEIVING THE OTTOMAN AMBASSADOR AFTER  
HER CORONATION



placed at the disposal of the needy state the resources of her private purse, which amounted to roughly three-tenths of the national budget. Later she was to burden the budget with a far heavier expenditure for her favourites; in both cases she did not differentiate between her own property and that of the state. But whatever may have happened later, at the time she uttered them her words were inspired by a genuine sense of responsibility hitherto unknown in a ruler. They resounded like a fanfare over sleepy Europe; the French chorus took up the note with enthusiasm. "Diderot, d'Alembert and I," wrote Voltaire, "there are three of us to build an altar to you!" Strange irony of history: the fat Louis remained deaf to the new anthem ringing in his own country, while those who were undermining the security of his throne had become the bards of the Russian autocrat. Twofold irony: the religious head of the most Christian nation on earth had become the heroine of the *avant-garde* of enlightenment.

The anomaly never troubled Catherine; in this she was a typical product of the eighteenth century. Before the French Revolution the philosophic movement termed "Enlightenment" was not characterized by any spiritual emotionalism; it was rather a substitute for disappointed faith, a daring game played by advanced minds. To Catherine, who had grown up in an atmosphere of strict Protestantism and at fourteen had changed her religion out of opportunism, this game meant a kind of inner vindication. But this was only her personal attitude. As the political head of the country she had never underrated the importance of the Church, the clergy represented a power to be reckoned with, and the superstitious piety of the masses was an advantage which she knew well how to turn to account. Such an attitude, judged in the light of present-day standards, which place a higher value on convictions than on intellect, may seem unpardonably frivolous, but in those days no two more congenial companions could have been found than a well-bred philosopher and a cultured priest. When Voltaire was asked how he, who denied God, could partake of Holy Communion, he used to reply that he "breakfasted according

to the custom of the country." Catherine believed that such customs were useful to a country and simplified the task of its ruler. The manifesto on her accession was an admission of religious faith; one of her first actions after she became Empress was to reopen the palace chapel which had been closed by Peter, and her next thought was to arrange for a coronation ceremony in the Kremlin at Moscow. From that day on millions of the faithful included the name of their new spiritual leader in their daily prayers. The power of the throne was grounded more firmly in these simple prayers than in anything else. Catherine had no intention of undermining this foundation. The clergy found her an invaluable ally in their fight to gain possession of the people's souls; she prayed and fasted, as the "most pious Czarina Elizabeth" had prayed and fasted. But whereas Elizabeth's religious exercises had been genuine, Catherine's were merely undertaken for purposes of propaganda. No priest had any power to influence her mind, and the Church Consistory became her legal opponent whenever the question at issue was one of temporal power. While Catherine was making a pilgrimage to the Troitza Convent, as Elizabeth had so often done, an "independent" commission appointed by her was dealing with the question of the secularization of church property. This was the one point on which Catherine could not disagree with her dead husband. It was a matter of urgent state necessity. The more this necessity became evident, the more marked was Catherine's show of devoutness.

"Adam Vassilievich," she wrote on the twenty-eighth of February, 1763, to the leader of the Cabinet. "As I am aware of the arrogance and madness of the Archbishop of Rostov, I fear that he will consecrate the shrine of Saint Dmitri without consulting me. Let me know in what manner you despatched it, with what instructions, and in whose care it now is."

The Archbishop of Rostov, Arssenij Mazeivitch, was the only dignitary of the Church who had dared to make an open stand, both from the pulpit and with his pen, against Catherine

and her plans for "despoiling the Church." A Polish nobleman by birth, passionate, fearless, armed with a thorough knowledge of theology, and firmly convinced of the justice of the clergy's cause, he was a man who seemed destined to lead the Church in its fight against the Imperial power. All he needed was the firm and open support of the Church, but this it did not give him. The Church waited instead for the meeting between Arssenij and the Empress, who had decided to undertake a pilgrimage to Rostov on foot in order to consecrate the bones of Saint Dmitri herself. This newly-canonized saint had been Arssenij's predecessor at Rostov, and had played exactly the same part under Peter the Great as Arssenij was now playing under Catherine: he had been the only bishop courageous enough to make a protest against the appropriation of ecclesiastical property. Far from being intimidated Catherine was quite obviously intrigued by this parallel. Whatever results her meeting with the "mad Archbishop" might have, the people would be aware of nothing save the impressive pilgrimage of their Empress along the dusty country roads.

But Arssenij forestalled Catherine. Before she left Moscow he sent a petition to the Synod which "from the first to the last word was an insult to Her Majesty." The Secretary of the Consistory Court refused to copy out and present this petition, so Arssenij wrote it with his own hand and despatched it in his own name. But that was not all; before a crowded congregation, in the presence of the assembled clergy of Rostov, he posted a solemn anathema against "all enemies of the Church, who stretch their hands to snatch what has been consecrated to God." The cup was full. Catherine returned the petition, in which she had been likened to Julian the Apostate, to the Synod and commanded this supreme spiritual tribunal to pass judgment on its erring brother. It seemed a rash step to take. Arssenij had said nothing that was not thought and felt by every other member of the Church. So far they had all maintained a cowardly silence; would they now dare to make an open stand against the Empress?

They did not dare. Arssenij was arrested, brought to Moscow and questioned before the Empress. The obstinate man must by this time have realized that his fellow-priests were prepared to desert him, yet he did not falter, but defended himself with such outspoken courage that Catherine was obliged to put her hands over her ears. The Synod, which had already given in so far to the Empress, had no alternative but to condemn its audacious crusader. This it did. Arssenij was dismissed from his See, and banished to a remote monastery where he was deprived of all writing materials so that he might have no further opportunity of demoralizing weak characters by his "lies", and where he was made to perform the most menial tasks. He was deprived of his name, and thereafter known as "Andrei Wal", which means: The Liar.

The accommodating Synod believed that it had put the Empress under an obligation to the Church, but actually it had rendered her a far greater service than that of ridding her of a dangerous enemy: it had opened her eyes to the extent of its power in relation to her own. If so far she had believed that as a usurper and a Protestant by birth she must exercise caution in her dealings with these high priests of the Greek Church, she now realized that this was unnecessary. She was dealing with servile spirits. A month after sentence had been passed on Arssenij she appeared among the Synod, and in a speech of unparalleled arrogance and amazing shrewdness, summed up the situation: "You are the successors of the Apostles who were commanded by God to teach mankind to despise riches, and who were themselves poor men. Their kingdom was not of this world. Do you understand me? I have frequently heard these truths from your own lips. How can you presume, without offending against your own consciences, to own such riches, such vast estates? . . . If you wish to obey the laws of your own Order, if you wish to be my most faithful subjects, you will not hesitate to return to the state that which you unjustly possess."

No second Arssenij rose to reply to this annihilating speech. That same day the new law ordaining the secularization of

ecclesiastical property was passed, and the next day Catherine set out on foot on her pilgrimage to Rostov where, sure of the emotional sympathy of the common people, she set up the silver shrine containing the wonder-working bones of Saint Dmitri. In mock humility she knelt beside the grave of the man who had done the very thing for which Arssenij had been so severely punished. But it was only a gesture. One may safely say that Catherine acted throughout this episode in the spirit of the Age of Enlightenment.

The secularization of the Church lands not only completed Peter's work by depriving the clergy of their power and making them the paid servants of the state, it also gave freedom to over a million peasants. If Catherine wished to shape her reign on Montesquian lines she was bound to admit that the most burning problem was the abolition of serfdom: the problem of personal freedom in its crudest and most primitive form. Over and above the social obligation there was a spiritual one, which could not be solved by compromise. It was not merely a question of bettering the conditions of the serfs, of reducing their number by a half or even a quarter; if Catherine wished to gain the genuine support of the masses, not a single slave must remain in Russia. The Russian language, with unconscious irony, uses the word "soul" to describe a serf, and the average price for a "soul" was thirty roubles. Whatever Catherine might do to increase the welfare, greatness, fame, civilization, and culture of her country would, in terms of humanity, be nothing more than a process of whitewashing, a pretence, a façade, so long as men were bought and sold like animals, so long as there were "souls" who had no right to dispose of their own bodies. "O, Freedom, the soul of all things, without thee there is no life!" wrote Catherine. If freedom is the world's most priceless treasure, then all that Catherine achieved at the expense of the people's slavery can be valued at less than thirty roubles.

It was this burning problem which gave Catherine her most painful encounter with reality. It happened during the early weeks of her reign and it is significant that she never refers to

the experience, preferring to be reproached for inconsistency rather than admit the failure of her optimistic belief in mankind. It is true that in 1789, when she was an old woman, she wrote to Grimm: "It was my desire and it would have given me joy to make everyone happy. Possibly I was too bold when I believed that men can become reasonable, just, and happy. . . ." But that was merely a general observation sandwiched between a hundred happy and self-confident remarks. Long before that she had already written to Grimm: "My position forces me to insist on having what I want"; she had already discovered that it is impossible to interrupt the organic development of a country with philosophy, idealism, or goodwill.

The conditions under which the peasant serfs lived varied considerably. On the plains under the protection of intelligent landowners, who realized that in their own interests they must "feed and tend their milch-cows," their lot was not appreciably worse, and in some senses even more peaceful, than that of the peasants in other European countries. But in the manufacturing and mining districts their life was a positive hell. Bought peasants were cheaper than any other form of labour, and were accordingly treated with less consideration; their working hours were unrestricted, the cost of their maintenance negligible, corporal punishment was the order of the day. The idea of hygienic or prophylactic working conditions was unheard of. Work in the mines was not only a torture—it involved danger to life. Even during Elizabeth's reign there had often been riots among this wretched section of the population, at which the nearest military command was informed and the strikers brought to reason by a suitable number of lashes from the knout. On the eighth of August, 1762, in the sixth week of her reign, Catherine issued a manifesto which was designed to attack the evil at its root: she forbade the owners of factories and mines to purchase "souls", saying that they must employ hired labourers who were to be provided with passports and paid according to contract. She prepared a second ukase, abolishing forced labour alto-

gether, but this was never issued. For events shaped themselves quite differently from her expectations.

Catherine's knowledge of the people was based solely on French literature; her conception of them was as idealistic as the French writers' had been until the sleepers they had roused to action proved to their awakeners that they themselves were dreamers. Catherine's disillusionment came three decades earlier than that of Mirabeau and Beaumarchais. As soon as the ukase which was to make free men out of slaves reached the various provinces, the majority of the peasants promptly laid down their tools. They migrated to the neighbouring districts, inciting their comrades, collecting signatures for a general strike, thrashing the persons and destroying the houses of those who, in spite of their efforts, continued to work in the mines, and distributing forged manifestos. The freed slaves, far from becoming grateful subjects were transformed into wild and dangerous rebels.

Why should Catherine's well-meant ukase have had this unforeseen result? The Russian moujik of the eighteenth century, owing to his entire lack of education, was lazy and asked very little of life. All he needed was a piece of dry bread and the comfort of religion—nothing more. He was, of course, reluctant to work hard for the sake of these modest requirements, it was only under pressure of serfdom and the knout that he laboured day in, day out in the sweat of his brow, enriching his master and laying the foundation of the country's prosperity. Naturally he was discontented, and the greatest discontent existed in those districts where the hated work was hardest: in the mines and factories. For many decades his indolent nature had chafed against the unbearable drudgery, and for many decades he had submitted from fear of the knout. Then one fine day a ukase appeared blowing the hot breath of freedom in his face, and the stored-up hatred of his masters, of servitude, violence, and enforced labour, broke out suddenly, blinding him to the humanity of the gesture and deafening him to the voice of reason. The result was a seething, raging chaos. There was no one to inform

the workers of the benevolent intentions of the government, no newspaper to influence them—and had there been, which of them could have read it?—they had no party, no organization, no leader from their own ranks to warn them of the folly of their behaviour. They acted with the wild instinct of hatred, they could not believe in the existence of a ruler who had their welfare at heart, their vision stopped short at their task-masters and tormentors, to whom at last they could refuse labour and obedience. They firmly refused either to work or to obey.

The effect of such a rebellion was incalculable. Not only was the loss suffered by manufacturers and mine-owners involved, the organization of the whole state was imperilled by the hordes of idle peasants who, without means of subsistence, wandered about spreading their propaganda. Somehow they must be brought to reason and forced back to work. Later—so Catherine consoled herself—she would attack the evil more radically, would educate the people and make them fit for freedom; for the present the only possible course was the one her predecessors had chosen. She despatched several regiments under the command of Prince Wiasemsky to quell the rebels. Former revolts had been suppressed by the lash alone: Wiasemsky had to use cannons.

Later the conditions of the mine-workers were improved to some extent. Under Catherine the crown purchased most of the mines, and treated the peasants better than the private capitalists had done. But this was only a minor reform, it had nothing to do with the ideal of freedom. To Catherine the word had become one of remote, religious significance, which she used throughout her life as others use the name of God, long after they have lost their living faith. When Catherine first conceived the idea of freeing the serfs she had counted on the logical and inevitable opposition of the privileged classes, of the property owners and capitalists. Whether she would have been strong enough to break down that opposition must remain an open question; one thing only is clear: her greatest strength, that faith in the goodwill and inherent

justice of the people which she had learned from Rousseau, was broken by this first encounter with the beast unchained.

Two years after her accession she appointed the same Wiasemsky whose cannons had brought the miners to reason to the responsible position of General-Procurator. In a letter written in her own hand she gave him her views on Russia. This summing up of her two years' experience began with the words: "The Russian Empire is so vast that any other form of government than that of an autocratic Emperor would be detrimental, for every other form fulfils itself more slowly and embodies passions which dissipate its strength." There was no more talk of a constitution, or of popular representation. Yet Catherine's conviction of the necessity for a *régime* of absolutism was honest and untainted by any conscious desire to become a tyrant. Her long letter to Wiasemsky closed with the words: "I love truth; at all times you can speak the truth without compunction. You need have no fear of disagreeing with me, if it is for the good of the cause. I do not like flattery and do not expect it from you—but I do expect straightforwardness toward myself, and firmness in your office."

Catherine had paid no attention to Panin's suggestions for a Constitution, and she paid as little to Bestushev's advice. On the twenty-ninth of June, the day after her accession, she recalled to Petersburg the man who had been the first to visualize her on the throne of Russia, who for four years had conspired, kept silent, and suffered for her sake. She sent Gregory Orlov, in his new capacity as first lord of the Chamber, thirty versts on the way to meet Bestushev; she welcomed him with open arms, as if he were a dear father, gave him a suite of apartments in the Summer Palace, and had food sent to him from her own kitchens. Nevertheless they suffered a mutual disappointment. Bestushev had grown old, not because he had added four years to his age, but because during those four years, spent far from the scene of changing events, he had remained the same. His small, intelligent eyes

still sparkled in his lean, thin-lipped face, he still held himself stiff and erect, every inch a courtier as well as a stubborn statesman—but he still believed in his old system, he still believed that the country's salvation was to be found in European alliances alone. Catherine herself had long since realized that Russia, a vast and autocratic empire, impregnable by very reason of its semi-barbarism, could only be the loser in any alliance, that Russia's advantage lay in maintaining peaceful relations and encouraging a healthy fear in foreign powers.

"I tell you plainly," she wrote to her ambassador in Warsaw, "I wish to remain on friendly terms with all the powers, even to be on the defensive, so that I may always take the part of the most oppressed side and thus become Europe's arbitrator."

Europe's arbitrator? A century ago Russia had still been an Asiatic state. Peter the Great had risked his life for the privilege of joining in the European orchestra, and now Catherine, a few weeks after her accession to the throne, was presuming to appoint herself the conductor! It was not enough that she governed the largest empire in the world, as its ruler she wished to govern the whole world. Greater than a man, greater than all men—she remembered the old refrain and it became her watchword. All through her life she remained true to it, for it was born not of her mind, but had its roots in the very depths of her being. She was a conqueror and remained a conqueror to the hour of her death. There could be no hesitation, no compromise where she was concerned. From the very first day of her reign she worked quietly, steadily, unostentatiously, but with a confidence upheld by the uncanny luck which never deserted her, for the extension of her power.

Peter the Great had dreamed of making Russia mistress of the Baltic Sea—that is to say, of uniting Courland with Russia. In 1795, just before her death, Catherine realized that dream. But she had already begun to prepare the ground on the fifth day of her reign.

When Anna Ivanovna of Courland was Empress of Russia, she made her favourite, Biron, who was a stable-boy by birth,

Duke of Courland. He had little opportunity of attending to the affairs of his duchy, since his position as favourite kept him in Russia, and it may be for this reason that the Courlanders cherished pleasant memories of him. When Elizabeth ascended the Russian throne, she banished Biron to Siberia, but she allowed him to retain his title of "Duke of Courland", merely stating that "he would not be able to leave Russia for some time", so that Courland was virtually without a government of its own, and was entirely dependent on Russia. In 1758 she supported the claim of Carl of Saxony, younger son of the King of Poland, which called forth from the Grand Duchess Catherine the remark: "This is a rare and ideal example of a completely disinterested injustice." But Carl of Saxony displeased the Protestant Courlanders, mainly because he was a Catholic. They demanded an undertaking that their religious freedom should not be interfered with, and when he refused to sign this undertaking, his "subjects" refused to take the oath of allegiance to him. The affairs of Courland remained in this unsettled state until the accession of Peter III, who recalled Biron from Siberia, not in order to restore him to his duchy but to induce him to renounce it voluntarily in favour of Prince George of Holstein. After nearly twenty years of banishment Biron did as he was asked; he abdicated in favour of George, and Godovitch was sent to Mitau to start a political campaign for the Holstein Prince. Peter promised the Courlanders his protection if they accepted his candidate, and made "the King of Prussia his guarantor" for this promise.

When Catherine came to the throne, Frederick the Great encouraged by his slave, Peter, was already casting greedy eyes on Courland. But Carl of Saxony was still in residence at the ducal palace of Mitau. On the fifth day of her reign the Department of Foreign Affairs presented Catherine with a petition requesting instructions for Simolin, the Russian minister in Courland. Catherine wrote on the margin: "Simolin is to ignore his previous instructions and privately to favour the Biron party above all others." On the fourth of August she handed Biron the deeds of gift and partition

together with her promise to aid him in regaining his duchy, in return for which he undertook to safeguard the practice of the Greek faith in Mitau, to give all possible facilities to Russian merchants, to reinstate the Russian post via Riga and Mitau, to establish the sale of Russian corn, while refusing all such concessions to other powers, to give the Russian army the right of marching through Courland, if necessary supplying them with quarters and provisions, and to give all Russian ships free entry to the harbours. The only thing that now remained to be done was to drive Carl of Saxony out of Mitau. This was accomplished quite simply and without bloodshed: he was systematically starved out. Simolin confiscated all his revenues, quartered soldiers on the estates of his supporters, and even cut off his supplies of food. Within the space of a few months he was obliged to leave Mitau. His father, the King of Poland, convened the Landtag to protest against Catherine's behaviour, whereupon Catherine commanded the Russian party in Poland "to break up the Landtag at all costs", which they did. In March, 1763, Biron entered Courland as the recognized Duke. "It is to our interests, in such close proximity to Russia, to have a Duke who is neither very aristocratic nor related to any of the great Courts, but whose position makes him entirely dependent on our country." These conditions were fulfilled: by the grace of Catherine a figurehead sat on the ducal throne of Courland.

Very soon, too, by the grace of Catherine, a figurehead was occupying the Polish throne.

"I am sending you Graf Kaiserling, as my ambassador to Poland, in order to make you, on the death of Augustus III, King of Poland," Catherine wrote on the second of August, 1762, to her former lover, Poniatovsky. They had never ceased to exchange letters—love-letters—and Poniatovsky had every reason to consider himself secretly betrothed to Catherine. Ever since she had seized the throne, since her husband's death, he had been counting the days until, in fulfilment of her promises, she should call him to her side at last. He

knew nothing about Orlov, or, if he did, he refused to believe that this raw, uneducated soldier could be anything more than a mere passing infatuation. And as yet Catherine had not dared to confess the whole truth to him. This cowardice does her credit—she who, in all else, was courageous to the point of recklessness—for it was the cowardice of a soft heart, which shrank from giving pain to another. She implored Poniatovsky to remember her vulnerable and insecure position. She offered him consolation for the future, but at the same time treated him like an obstinate child who must be tactfully brought to reason, by dangling before his eyes the bribe of a new toy—the crown of Poland.

The thought of this crown had never occurred to Poniatovsky. He was not cut out to be a king, he hated Poland, his ambition and his dream had always been to play a brilliant rôle at some more pleasant Court. At first sight the new toy did not attract him. "I would a thousand times rather be an ambassador in close proximity to you than be a king here," he wrote to Catherine. But she remained deaf to this flattery and insisted on having her way. She had three good reasons for this: she wanted to be sure that Poniatovsky was permanently out of the way; she wanted to compensate him generously for the loss of herself; and, finally, she wanted, through him, to rule Poland. Her letters to her one-time lover grew cooler and more political in their tone. Since her accession Catherine no longer made any secret of her relationship with Orlov; eventually it even came to Poniatovsky's ears that the apartments of "the first lord of the Chamber" were next door to those of the Empress. But he still believed that his presence would have the power to change her again, and he continued to implore to be allowed to come to Russia for a few months, or even a few weeks. Catherine replied with great patience and absolute firmness. She was no longer interested in Poniatovsky as a man, but she was growing daily more interested in her candidate for the Polish throne.

Historically, Poland—that is the Poland of those days—was a unique political state: it was a republic ruled by an elected

king. This king was chosen by the Landtag, a body which consisted of all the privileged families, who numbered about a thousand, with equal powers of voting, so that the election of the king depended on a unanimous decision. The same procedure applied to all other decisions of state importance. For the past hundred and fifty years this "liberum veto" had made every sensible reform impossible in Poland, and opened wide the door to foreign interference and the corruptibility of the Szlachta (the lesser nobility).

While she had been only the Grand Duchess, Catherine had noted that it was entirely to Russia's interest to allow Poland to remain in its "propitious state of anarchy", a cynical observation, for she was well aware that Polish anarchy was propitious not to Poland but to Russia. In this matter, too, her instinct was infallible from the outset. She was determined one day to swallow Poland, as a cat might swallow a mouse. But the day had not yet come. The country must first become still weaker, still more disintegrated, still more dependent. To this end a weak and purposeless king must be found, one who was completely dependent on Catherine: in a word, Poniatovsky.

In September 1763, Augustus III died. "Do not laugh at me," Catherine wrote to Panin, "when I say that I leapt from my chair at this news; the King of Prussia leapt up from table when he heard it." She immediately began to show the most amazing activity. There are two reliable ways of influencing a "free election": money and force. Catherine decided to use both. According to the Polish constitution a regent was appointed during the interregnum. Catherine wrote to Kaiserling telling him to use every possible means to influence the regent in his favour, "and if it is not possible for less, to go up to a hundred thousand ducats." At the same time she informed him that eighty thousand Russian soldiers were being moved towards the Polish frontier.

She was, however, not the only person who had an interest in the election of the Polish king. To assure Poniatovsky's victory she had to come to an understanding with Austria,

France, Prussia, and Turkey. The Austrian candidate to the Polish throne—the Elector of Saxony—was the most dangerous rival, for tradition favoured the union of the Saxon and Polish thrones and a strong party of Saxon adherents existed in Poland. But whatever Maria Theresa favoured Frederick automatically opposed; therefore in this matter Frederick was Catherine's natural ally. She promised that she would get rid of the Austrian candidate, if he, in exchange, would get rid of the French. This first step was easily accomplished, but it was not enough. How can a free nation be compelled to elect a particular man as its king? Only by force of arms, or by a sufficiently impressive threat of armed force. In the language of diplomatic communications this was termed: "guaranteeing the free and uninfluenced election. . . ." Frederick, who soon realized that Catherine's interest in the continuance of "propitious anarchy" in Poland was greater than his own, demanded a Russian-Prussian alliance, while signifying his willingness to respect Polish freedom. This bargain did not suit Catherine at all. She had nothing against Frederick personally and nothing against an alliance with Prussia—but such a pact might remind people of Peter III. Instead of sending him the Treaty of Alliance, she sent him water-melons from Astrakan. Frederick expressed his thanks extravagantly. "There is a vast gulf between melons from Astrakan and the assembly of the deputies in Poland; but everything comes within the scope of your activity. The same hand that gives away fruit, can distribute crowns and guarantee the peace of Europe, for which I, and all those who are interested in the Polish situation, will bless you."

In March, 1764, the negotiations took on a more definite tone. A defensive treaty between Prussia and Russia was concluded and on the same day both parties undertook "to leave no stone unturned, and to resort, if need be, even to force of arms should anyone attempt to prevent the free election of the king in Poland or to meddle with the existing constitution of this republic."

France had declared herself disinterested in the election of

the Polish king; but she was by no means disinterested. Poniatovsky and his anglophile influence over Catherine were still fresh in the minds of Parisians. Catherine's interest in Poniatovsky was misinterpreted; French gallantry suspected gallant motives, Orlov was regarded as the passing fancy of a temporarily widowed bride, and the Empress's desire to provide the young Pole with a royal crown as the preparation for a highly unsuitable *mariage*. The French protest was, however, not made directly but circuitously through the Porte (the government of the Turkish empire). In June, 1764, the Grand Vizier sent a note in which Turkey recognized the Russo-Prussian Alliance and approved the election of a Piast (a native king) to the Polish throne, but raised an objection to one person: Poniatovsky. "He is too young, too inexperienced and"—a weighty argument in the eyes of the Porte—"unmarried. A marriage taking place after his election, might serve as a means of increasing the power of the king to the disadvantage of the neighbouring states."

This reference left no loophole for misunderstanding. Poniatovsky's family begged him to remove the objection without delay by marrying a Polish aristocrat before the election day. He obstinately refused to do this, saying that he would rather forfeit the crown. "The one and only thought that occupied my mind at that time," he wrote in his *Memoirs*, "was that the Empress of Russia would one day consider marrying me. Without her the crown seemed worthless to me." Throughout all the political manœuvring, intrigue, intervention, exchange of notes, and treaties which accompanied the approaching election, Poniatovsky remained a human being, a blind and credulous lover, who refused to be robbed of his last hope. But it was wrested from him. He received a message from the Russian Court—in other words from Catherine—to the effect that it would be desirable for him, before the opening of the Landtag, to marry, or at any rate become engaged. If his refusal to marry any other woman had been a veiled proposal to Catherine, her wish that he should do so was an open refusal. At last Poniatovsky was forced to realize

that he had irrevocably lost the woman he loved. He signed the Electoral agreement, in which among other things he undertook not to marry without the consent of the Senate, and in any case to confine his choice to a Catholic princess.

On the sixteenth of August the Landtag assembled. Russian soldiers poured over the frontier, Prussian soldiers stood in readiness—two hundred thousand bayonets guaranteed the “free and undisturbed election of the Polish king.” Stanislas Poniatovsky was elected Stolink of Lithuania unanimously and without fuss. “My congratulations on the new king, whom we have made,” Catherine wrote to Panin. But it was six weeks before she remembered to congratulate the new king himself. The other Courts were not so remiss, nor were the courtiers. Voltaire, who was misinformed and was therefore unwittingly tactless, wrote:

*Trop éloigné de sa personne  
Je me borne à former des vœux:  
On lui décerne une couronne  
Et je voudrais qu'il en eût deux.*

Two years after her accession Catherine was able to congratulate herself on a very satisfactory piece of work successfully accomplished. And yet not for one single day during those two years had she been sure of her throne. The airy confidence with which she attended public functions and faced her ministers and the foreign diplomats was an effort of will. She had suffered set-backs and received alarming threats. The enthusiastic scene of her coronation in Petersburg had been followed by a more than cool reception in Moscow: she pretended not to notice this and reported in all her letters that the feeling in the old capital left nothing to be desired. Only the English ambassador was given a glimpse of the shadow that hung over her and in a moment of depression she confessed to him that she “was not entirely happy.” That was in October, 1762, when the conspiracy of the brothers Chruchtchov and Lieutenant Gurchev was discovered and nipped in the bud. It was actually quite a trivial episode. A few drunken

officers had said in their cups that the throne belonged by rights to the imprisoned Emperor Ivan, and that soon there might be "more changes." But to Catherine these drunken political babblings represented another symptom. How many Chrutchovs, how many Gurchevs were there in the army? Not six weeks before the same army had stood behind her to a man—how many had remembered in those few weeks that they had raised an unlawful pretendant to the throne? Men's faces are impenetrable masks, and what eyes can pierce through the uniform to the heart of a soldier? How many hearts had Catherine already lost to this disturbing phantom, "the lawful Emperor"? The Senate sentenced the conspirators to death; Catherine granted their pardon. Gurchev and his companions were gossips; she had no fear of idle gossip, let them have their miserable lives. A very different and more dangerous enemy had appeared at the trial, one whom in her secret heart she condemned to death, though he was as innocent as a child in the cradle. For it was as a child in his cradle that he had been crowned lawful Emperor.

The Gurchev conspiracy had been discovered by Gregory Orlov, and six months later a group of officers were found to be plotting against Orlov. They were former comrades of his, some of whom—Lieutenants Chitrovo, Rosslolev, and Lassunski—hardly a year before had conspired with him to put Catherine on the throne. And the headquarters of the conspiracy was the Ismaelov regiment, from whom Catherine had sought protection and assistance on her memorable journey from Peterhof to Petersburg, and who had been the first to proclaim her Empress. What had happened in the space of one short year to turn the Ismaelovs so bitterly against their idolized comrade that they wished to attempt his life? Their motive was not far to seek—it was jealousy. The officers had done exactly the same for Catherine as Orlov—they had plotted, spread propaganda, and risked their lives as he had done, and in return had received a decoration and a few thousand roubles apiece. But Orlov had been made a duke, he had an annual income of one hundred and fifty thousand roubles, he was

the Empress's favourite, and one of the most powerful men in the country. One of the most powerful? Chitrovo declared that he was well on the way to becoming the most powerful, that Catherine was travelling to Rostov with him in order to marry him. And this had to be prevented at all costs in the interests of Russia.

At the Court of inquiry Catherine referred to Chitrovo's statement as a "malicious rumour, invented merely with a view to damaging her in the eyes of her subjects." Actually her journey to Rostov had nothing to do with Orlov, it was solely concerned with the bones of Saint Dmitri, nor had she the slightest intention of making her handsome favourite her husband, either then or later. None the less Chitrovo's statement was more than a "malicious rumour." It had very real, if somewhat confused foundations.

Catherine's relationship with Orlov was a complicated one, not because Catherine was complex but because Orlov was. Catherine rose at five in the morning and worked fifteen hours a day. The short interval between the time her official duties ended—usually late in the evening—and her sinking into a deep sleep of exhaustion was all she could spare to snatch hungrily at the small measure of personal happiness that fell to her share. Her love-life resembled that of an important business man; it was simple, very sentimental and rather pathetic. She had no time for the more elaborate gestures of coquetry, no time for dreaming or playing. That was why she invariably felt a sense of guilt toward the men she loved, why she loaded them with preposterous gifts as business men load their women with diamonds because they feel that their worldly activities are a theft from the time that should be devoted to love, since love demands everything.

But was it love that Orlov wanted from Catherine? Or was it merely the material advantages which, like an oriental goddess, she continued to shower on him and his brothers? On the face of it, this would seem to be so; it seemed as if nothing but relentless ambition and colossal vanity bound Orlov to Catherine, just as in his day it had bound "Monsieur

Pompadour," Count Shuvalov, to Elizabeth. But Orlov was no male cocotte. He was a man. He was more: he was a barbarian. "Rien de plus compliqué qu'un barbare," says Flaubert. This Orlov was the same man who, with three bullets in his body, had stood by his guns, and later, at the risk of his life, had eloped with the mistress of his superior officer. Ambition and vanity may have played a part in these exploits. Ambition and vanity may have played their part when Orlov fell in love with the Grand Duchess Catherine, but there had been danger, enormous danger, in conspiring against the Emperor and planning a *coup d'état* for his wife. At that time he and Catherine had been equals; the fact that he was risking his life for her had wiped out the difference in their social rank. He had been in a position to do more for her, and he did more for her than she for him. At that time there had been no personal conflict between them.

But no sooner was Catherine crowned Empress than the situation changed. Orlov made frantic efforts to keep her in his power. In a confidential talk with the Hetman Rasumovsky he boasted that in another four weeks he could dethrone Catherine. "Possibly," was old Rasumovsky's calm reply, "very possibly, young man. But a fortnight before then we should have hanged you." Rasumovsky's answer was witty and to the point: it made a deep impression on Orlov. He realized that, in spite of what had happened in the past, from now on he was Catherine's pawn, her lover, her favourite, a man who was rewarded for giving her pleasure. True he took all the rewards, allowed himself to be made a Count, accepted a fantastic income in return for very slender services, for he was ambitious and above all things inordinately extravagant, but the man in him, the healthy barbarian, revolved against this unnatural situation. Before her accession to the throne, they had never quarrelled—now they quarrelled almost daily, and it was always Orlov who provoked the quarrel and Catherine who did everything in her power to restore peace. For Catherine loved peace, as do all those who seek for happiness in love.

Orlov was anything but happy. He did what no favourite

had ever dared to do: he deceived Catherine, and moreover deceived her openly. This was hardly the conduct of a man influenced solely by ambition, for he would have feared to jeopardize his position and risk losing his advantages. It was because he enjoyed these advantages and received presents from Catherine that Orlov deceived her; he deceived her because as a man and a barbarian he hated her for what she gave him, and he hated her even more for all that he was no longer able to give her, since she no longer needed it: his protection, his strength, his contempt for death. He deceived her because he needed a woman to whom he could prove that he was a master, a superior, a giver. He deceived her in order to prove to himself, to her, and to the whole world, that he was ready, at a moment's notice, to sacrifice the favours of an Empress to his own capricious virility.

His moods of capriciousness hurt Catherine unbearably. His attentions to the most insignificant of her ladies-in-waiting made her suffer as only a very jealous woman in love can suffer, and she forgave him again and again as a loving woman forgives the only man who attracts her irresistibly. For Orlov was the man who claimed all her passion; he was her "great love" despite the many who were to succeed him, despite Potiomkin who was a far greater man and was to play a bigger part in Catherine's life. "There would never have been anybody else," Catherine wrote to Potiomkin, referring to Orlov, "if he had not grown tired!" Ten years had elapsed between this confession and Orlov's first unfaithfulness, ten years of superhuman tolerance and patience. It is probable that Catherine would have shown more pride and greater firmness in dealing with her faithless lover had she not been his Empress, and far superior to him both in intelligence and breeding. She had a very natural feeling that she must make up to him for this. The very things that made him unfaithful to her made her completely helpless in face of his unfaithfulness. She held him in the hollow of her hand because she was his Empress—and he in turn had power over her because he knew he could make her suffer.

She had no time for suffering, she barely had time for happiness—only one short hour a day. Sorrow is an exacting emotion. She could not give herself up to it completely nor could she master it in a dignified way, so that she was forced to buy immediate relief, balm to soothe her agony, at any cost. Here is a palace for you—but give up that Senator's wife, I cannot bear it another day. Here is a diamond, large enough to cover my portrait—but stop sulking, say that you love me, prove it to me so that I may sleep, for at five o'clock I must be up, sitting at my desk ready to make important decisions. It was an unequal battle. Orlov's demands grew more and more exorbitant.

He wanted to be Catherine's lawful husband—perhaps even to be Emperor. And why not? If he accepted payment at all, why not demand the highest price? Greatness enhances everything, an Emperor is above criticism, a lawful husband is not a male courtesan. But this very wish led Orlov into the fatal mistake of adopting the tone of the typical courtesan, whose one desire is for marriage. Catherine dared not refuse him outright: her heart's happiness was at his mercy; moreover, marriage was a bribe for which much balm could be bought. In spite of her passion for him, she was not blind to Orlov's faults; she exaggerated his qualities, glorified him, idolized him, yet she knew exactly what he was worth. She might write a hundred times to Frau Bielke in Hamburg or to Madame Geoffrin in Paris that the beauty of his face was only surpassed by the nobility of his character—she knew all the same that he was unfitted for the serious business of government, that she might give him her heart, her body, all the treasures of the earth, but on no account must she give him power. For she loved power, the unlimited power of an autocrat, even more than she loved Orlov.

She did not say "No." She continued to hold out the idea of marriage as a bribe. She decided to find out how Elizabeth had acted toward Rasumovsky in a similar situation. One night she sent Chancellor Vorontzov to call on the old White Russian. He found Rasumovsky sitting at the open hearth

reading the Bible. He listened in silence to what his late visitor had to say, then rose, opened a costly ivory cabinet, took from it a parchment roll tied with a faded pink ribbon, all with slow and impressive dignity. He replaced the pink ribbon in the little cabinet, pressed the parchment scroll passionately to his lips several times, made the sign of the cross before the ikon with tears in his eyes—then threw the scroll into the open flames.

"Tell Her Majesty that I was never anything more than the humble slave of the late Empress Elizabeth Petrovna," he said.

When Vorontzov returned to Catherine with the news, she gave him a steady, penetrating look. "We understand one another," she said. "There was no secret marriage between Elizabeth and Rasumovsky. I never believed that story." This incident disposed of the question of precedent. We shall never know whether Rasumovsky acted spontaneously or in obedience to a command of Catherine's. She treated him, however, with the greatest kindness to the day of his death.

But Orlov was not so easily discouraged. After all, Rasumovsky had never been more than a handsome man, but he, Gregory Orlov, and his brothers, had raised Catherine to the throne. Again he tortured her with his moods and again she appeared to give in. Then suddenly Bestushev, worn out as a politician, but still capable of intrigue, began collecting signatures for a petition from the high nobility, members of the Senate, and the Clergy, requesting the Empress to re-marry. The reason given was the need for an heir to the throne, a need which appeared to be insufficiently satisfied by the Czarevitch who was extremely delicate and subject to fits. The terms of the request were explicit. Catherine was asked not to marry a foreign prince, but to choose a universally popular Russian nobleman as her husband—a pretty clear reference to Gregory Orlov. A few ingenuous people went so far as to put their signatures to the petition, and eventually it reached Panin, who immediately requested an audience of Catherine and when they were alone asked her if she had authorized Bestushev to take this step. Catherine denied it. She read in Panin's eyes

what the verdict of the Court circle would be on such a marriage: it was crushing.

But even more crushing was the discovery of the Chitrovo conspiracy. Orlov had always believed that his popularity with the army was assured; now he had to face the fact that his popularity was lost, that not even his former comrades would tolerate any further increase in the Imperial favour shown to him. At his trial Chitrovo stated frankly and boldly that he considered a marriage between Catherine and Orlov as a national calamity, and that he would rather have killed all five of the Orlov brothers and suffered the consequences than have countenanced such a disaster. The further proceedings of the trial proved beyond a doubt that Chitrovo was not a foolish eccentric, but that he was voicing the opinion of the soldiers, the "national opinion": the Orlovs had become too overbearing, they had received more favours than envy could tolerate.

But Chitrovo said more than this: he also said that, before her accession to the throne, Catherine had signed a declaration whereby she was to reign only until the Czarevitch had attained his majority, and that this declaration had been destroyed by the Orlovs after her accession. And he said: "If the Empress marries again, she must marry a prince of the royal blood—preferably a brother of the imprisoned Czar Ivan, so that justice may be done."

These proceedings took place before a secret tribunal; judgment was not passed by a regular court. Chitrovo and his accomplices were deprived of their military rank—the Empress was always lenient toward gossips—and banished to remote parts of the Empire. None the less the matter caused more of a stir than Catherine liked, and she adopted a measure which had been customary from time to time since the days of Peter the Great, and which despite its astonishing ingenuity usually proved successful. Drums were beaten in the public squares of all the important towns and a herald read aloud a proclamation to the assembled crowds stating that "everyone

should go about his office or occupation and refrain from all useless and unseemly gossip and criticism of the actions of the government."

The people actually did go about their own affairs and occupations, and the grass grew over the Chitrovo affair as quickly as it had grown over the Gurchev scandal. The marriage project was dropped and even the overbearing Orlov was forced to bow to the will of the people. This was the one advantage which Catherine reaped from the whole business.

But during the trial Catherine's right to the throne had been questioned, and the name of the prisoner Ivan had cropped up. It was to be mentioned again and again, with increasing persistency. First Panin received an anonymous letter which ran: "The Empress will be sent back to her country, Orlov will be drawn and quartered, and the good, innocent Emperor Ivan Ivanovitch placed upon the throne." Next Bestushev received a letter: "They have wronged the innocent Emperor Ivan." Then anonymous epistles of a similar nature began to pour in on the French and English ambassadors. In the summer of 1764 Catherine prepared for a journey to the Baltic provinces. The letters increased in number; there was constant mention of an impending catastrophe. In spite of this the Empress did not abandon her plans for the journey. It seemed as if she was determined to challenge fate. On the twentieth of June an anonymous document was found in the street containing abuse of the Empress and an impassioned demand that Ivan should be appointed Regent. "All this is contemptible," Catherine said as she handed the letter over to Panin. On the twenty-first of June she set out on her journey.

Ten days later Ivan Ivanovitch was dead.

## CHAPTER X

### IVAN

"I THINK Catherine has provided the playwrights with a subject for a great tragedy," Voltaire wrote, when the first news of Ivan's murder reached Europe. This comment on an event calculated to inspire nothing but fear and pity was sublime in its detachment, and completely free from moral censure, yet it implied a criticism of Catherine which the writer was later reluctant to admit. If Catherine had any part in the Schlüsselburg tragedy, then that part was a terrible one.

For her victim was pure and free from any earthly stain. It was Ivan's fate both in life and in death always to atone for the actions of others. When he was barely six months old his downy head was royally anointed, and no power on earth was able to wash that sacred symbol away. When he was two years old Elizabeth dethroned him and sent him with his family to Ranenburg. When he was four the first conspiracy in his name was set afoot, and for his sake the lovely Lapouchina had her tongue torn out and was sentenced to a hundred strokes of the lash, the Austrian ambassador was dismissed, and Maria Theresa was left to fight her Silesian campaign alone. And because others, who were total strangers to him, had wanted to give him something which was beyond his desire or comprehension, he was separated from his parents and sent alone to Cholmogory; the prattling child was treated as if he were a dangerous criminal, immured in solitary confinement and left to the care of rough soldiers. His cries did not reach Elizabeth's ears, but his existence never ceased to alarm the mighty Empress. He was a nightmare to her. The fact that he remained alive, that no "malignant fever" put a final

end to her torment and his own, is a Russian miracle; but Elizabeth was a truly religious woman. She might commit seven or more sins a day but she did not dare even to formulate the wish for this innocent child's death. What she did was a thousand times more cruel than murder, but it offended against none of the canons of the Church. Ivan grew up without ever seeing the blue sky, or breathing the fresh air, without playmates, always alone but never unguarded. A compassionate priest taught him to read, but he read only holy books. In this way ten years passed.

Russia is an immense country, but eventually rumours penetrated even to the furthest steppes, they travelled the longest roads, spread from farm to farm, and by 1756 far too many people knew where the one-time Emperor was imprisoned. One night Elizabeth had him blindfolded and removed from Cholmogory to the fortress of Schlüsselburg, but the Governor of Cholmogory was told to continue sending his monthly reports to the Court, so that even the officials of the Imperial Chancellory might believe that Ivan was still imprisoned there. A nameless youth was taken to the Schlüsselburg, and even the governor was given no more definite information than that he was to be strictly guarded, and that no one was to ask his age on peril of death, or betray his whereabouts to the prisoner. "Prisoner No. 1" was housed in an inner casemate separated from the main fortress by a wide canal, in a small room with a single window, which was blocked up; he was dressed in rags so that no one might guess his exalted origin, and he slept on a wretched pallet.

Two officers, Ensign Vlashev and Sergeant Tshekin, were appointed to attend and guard him. Apart from these two, only the governor of the fortress had access to the prisoner. When his cell was cleaned, Prisoner No. 1 was hidden behind a screen. Vlashev and Tshekin were never allowed to leave the inner casemate, they were not permitted to receive visitors or to write letters; they were locked up for an indefinite period with their nameless prisoner and cut off from all contact with the outside world. They were no doubt normal and

kindly men by nature, but it is a well-known fact that prolonged incarceration without hope of escape can demoralize even the most noble and high-minded characters. As time went on Vlashev and Tshekin grew to hate their prisoner, they began to mock him and torment him. He was a helpless victim and easily roused to anger. One day he shouted: "How dare you speak to me, you pig?" This outburst impressed the governor of the fortress and he reported it to Alexander Shuvalov. A few weeks later he sent a further report:

On the instructions of Your Excellency, I asked the prisoner who he was. He stated he was a prince. I told him he was to put this nonsense out of his head and to refrain from telling such lies in future. He is now obviously out of his mind and I cannot help being afraid of him. When I address him he says: "How dare you shout at me? I am the Imperial Prince of Russia—I am your Emperor!"

Fresh instructions were immediately sent from Petersburg.

If the prisoner is insubordinate or makes *improper statements*, you shall put him in irons until he obeys, and if he still resists he must be thrashed with a stick or a whip, as you think fit.

On the eighteenth of September the governor reported:

The prisoner is somewhat quieter than formerly. He no longer tells lies about his identity. I have frequently warned the officers not to torment him.

What a world of unspeakable misery is contained in these few dry reports!

A few weeks after her accession, and a few days after Peter's grim death, Catherine paid a secret visit to the Schlüsselburg, to see the "lawful Emperor," the only dangerous rival to her power, face to face.

Ivan was now twenty-four years old. Though he had never breathed fresh air, or taken any exercise other than pacing his cell like a caged animal, he was tall and slender, with a

fair skin, blond curly hair, and a beard worn straight and short like Christ's, after the manner of the simple Russian peasant.

Nothing is known of the interview which took place between Catherine and Ivan; it must have been the big scene of that tragedy which Voltaire described as a subject worthy of the dramatists' attention. Never in the whole of history can two figures, equal in greatness and perfection, have faced each other in like circumstances: the woman representing all the beauty, the wisdom, the responsibility, the corruption of worldly power—the man pure and innocent, as free from sin as on the day of his birth, ignorant of everything save the Scriptures, ennobled by unmerited and unspeakable suffering. What did he feel, this man who had never seen a woman, at the sight of the proud, voluptuous Empress? What effect had the spectacle of his misery on the usurper to his throne? It is said that after the interview Catherine broke down and wept. Why?

Later she said that she had found the prisoner "in addition to having a stammer which made his speech almost unintelligible, weak-minded and lacking in natural understanding." But this statement was made at a time and in circumstances which rob it of any semblance of truth; it was at the time of the trial which investigated Ivan's murder, when, in the eyes of Europe, Catherine stood accused. If she had really found a stuttering idiot in the Schlüsselburg, she would doubtless have displayed her natural kind-heartedness, have freed the unhappy man and given as many people as possible the opportunity of seeing for themselves how unsuited he was to be an Emperor. She had obviously paid her secret visit to the Schlüsselburg so that she might be able to inform the world of Ivan's condition and thus put an end to his aspirations to the throne. But her return had been as secret as her going—so Ivan was not mad after all. His mental faculties were, of course, not on a level with her own. How could they be? He had received no education, he was without worldly experience of any kind. He was obviously not fitted to rule a country, but his wonderful purity would have the power to

amaze and disturb a country. It had even disturbed Catherine: it was she, not he, who broke down after their interview.

But that was a momentary weakness. The Empress could not allow herself to be swayed by such emotions. Ivan in the Schlüsselburg was a martyr, a saint; no amount of self-discipline could wipe out the memory of his shining purity—but, though Catherine's heart might break at the thought of so much undeserved misery, Ivan on the throne of Russia would imperil all the good and useful things she had begun to do, he would be a menace to Russia's prosperity and greatness, a menace to progress, to Enlightenment and philosophy.

Very soon after Catherine's visit to the Schlüsselburg a ukase was issued to Vlashev and Tshekin, to the effect that:

If someone should come unexpectedly with a detachment of soldiers, or alone to remove the prisoner, without a warrant in the handwriting of Her Majesty the Empress, this must be regarded as a trick and an attack of the enemy, and the prisoner must on no account be handed over. But should the enemy power prove so strong that no other way of escape is possible, then the prisoner must be killed and on no account handed over alive.

The order was signed by Panin. Panin was an honourable man, a man of high principles. He had opposed and displeased Peter often enough in defending his principles. He often opposed Catherine, too, but without displeasing her. Catherine's judgment of the character of any man with whom she was not in love was sound. She knew exactly how far she could depend on people, and she was not suspicious as Elizabeth had been. At the time of the Chitrovo conspiracy when a list of accomplices was produced in which, as well as the names of Shuvalov and Trubetsky, those of Countess Dashkov and Panin had appeared, she threw the list without comment into the fire. She knew, without having to resort to a painful investigation that Countess Dashkov and Panin both hated Orlov. And she knew, too, that despite this hatred, her son's tutor was an implacable enemy of Ivan. In the autumn of 1763 she confided the "secret arrangements" to Panin.

Vlashev and Tshekin addressed an urgent petition to Panin: they had not been allowed to leave the Schlüsselburg for six years, and they asked that they might at last be released from their insupportable duties. "Have pity, little father," they wrote, and Panin replied: "I know that you have grounds for complaint in your position, but I also know that you may look forward to an early end to your mission. Have patience a little longer, and rest assured that you will not be left unrewarded."

Why was the very reasonable request of the two officers not granted? Probably because it was thought that once they escaped from the Schlüsselburg they might talk, and their gossip would be dangerous. But what then was the meaning of the reference to "an early end to their mission"? Surely Ivan might be expected to live for years? Perhaps that was a mere figure of speech to pacify the two officers and keep them at their posts.

But they refused to be pacified or to remain quiet. In November they wrote to Panin a second time, even more urgently: "Little father, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ release us, for we have come to the end of our strength!" It was a scream of mortal anguish from the casemate of the Schlüsselburg to the man who was making the "secret arrangements." Panin sent them each a thousand roubles in gold and a promise "that compliance with your request will in no case be postponed later than the early months of the summer."

This time a date had been mentioned, not, it is true, a definite one, but nevertheless a date. And on the fifth July Ivan was dead. But that, of course, was merely an unfortunate coincidence. The circumstances of Ivan's murder were so involved that Panin could not possibly have foreseen them, and if this manner of "compliance with their request" had occurred to him, it is hardly likely that he would have hinted it to the two officers. Probably they were only chance words that Panin wrote without thinking, probably when he wrote them there was some plan afoot to bring the mission of the wretched Vlashev and Tshekin to a speedy end by moving

Ivan to another fortress with new guards, but then, when the time came, it was decided after all to leave the prisoner where he was.

Early in the summer Catherine prepared for her journey to the Baltic provinces, in spite of threats, in spite of anonymous letters, and in spite of Frederick II's warning to Peter, which she could hardly have had time to forget: "Your Majesty should bear in mind that in your absence some miserable creature may set on foot a plot to place Ivan on the throne. . . ." At that time no one in the country had mentioned Ivan, no one had thought of disputing Peter's claim to the throne. But now Ivan's name buzzed in Catherine's ears day in, day out, like a swarm of bees. And yet she dared to make the journey. She trusted in her lucky star, and she trusted Vlashev and Tshekin. This couple, brutalized by years of isolation, panting for freedom and raging with hatred against the innocent cause of their wretchedness, would certainly not hesitate to carry out the instructions sent to them in the autumn of 1762. If anyone should come "with a detachment of soldiers, or alone, to remove the prisoner," they would have no scruples about ridding themselves once and for all of their encumbrance, and murdering the purest man on earth. A hundred times a day they wished him dead, and they would certainly realize that wish if they found an opportunity of doing so and escaping the consequences.

But even that was more than Catherine cared to admit later. At the public investigation into Ivan's murder the instructions which had been sent to the two officers were found to have disappeared. No shred of evidence has ever been discovered to prove whether Catherine was aware that at the very moment of her departure there was a wretched individual inside the Schlüsselburg itself who was "setting on foot a plot to liberate Ivan and place him on the throne."

The name of this wretched creature was Mirovitch.

All our knowledge of Mirovitch derives from the official proceedings which were brought against him. The following

facts have come down to history from the account of him given during the elaborately prepared preliminary examination:

On the day of Catherine's accession to the throne he was twenty-two years old and a second-lieutenant in the Smolensk regiment. He was of aristocratic Ukrainian parentage, though his family's estates had been confiscated in 1709 as a punishment for its complicity in the Mazeppa revolt. Young Mirovitch had no money and, what was worse, he was even poorer than his brother officers. He played cards and was unlucky. His creditors were pressing him and he could not pay them. His three sisters were starving in Moscow and he could do nothing for them. He started a lawsuit with a view to recovering his family's confiscated estates, but the Senate refused his application. Mirovitch, however, was not so easily disposed of; he addressed his grievances to God and to the world at large. On the back of a letter from his mother, in which she refused his request for forty roubles, he wrote: "May Saint Nicholas hear my vow that from the year 1763 to my death I will not smoke, take snuff, or play cards." On another scrap of paper he vowed that from his twenty-fifth birthday onward he would drink only a very little brandy. But Saint Nicholas did not hear his vow, and his petition addressed to the Empress was rejected. He then proceeded to try his luck with other influential personages. He visited Panin, Count Dashkov, and finally his Ukrainian countryman, the Hetman Rasumovsky. The old Hetman gave him a friendly hearing and then said to him: "The dead do not return from the grave. Carve out your own career, young man. Seize fortune by the forelock, as others have done."

It was the Hetman's habit on all occasions to express himself with solemn and impressive dignity. His friends were accustomed to this idiosyncrasy, but his words made a tremendous impression on young Mirovitch, whose prospects were hopeless and whose mind was in a turmoil. They echoed in his ears like some magic formula, that had only to be applied in the right circumstances and at the right moment to make all his dreams come true. He continued to ponder the secret meaning

of the magic words as he went about his humble duties—he was at this time an officer on duty in the Schlüsselburg, though only in the outer fortress, where no one knew or was allowed to know what went on in the inner casemate. But one day Mirovitch heard the truth about the mysterious prisoner from a dismissed drummer, and in a flash he believed he had discovered the meaning of the magic formula. Carve out his own career? Seize fortune by the forelock? Was there not another man who, from being a poor, debt-ridden officer like Mirovitch himself, had become one of the richest and most powerful men in the country, and whose name was Gregory Orlov? What had Orlov done? He had helped Catherine to overthrow her predecessor, and for this he had been rewarded with sacks of gold and countless honours. Why should not he, Mirovitch, be capable of doing what others had done before him? If he helped Ivan to overthrow Catherine, then Ivan would reward him with the highest honours and fabulous wealth. . . .

Mirovitch was frivolous by nature, a drinker, a gambler, a spendthrift, but he was also a pious and a very superstitious man. He was, like Orlov, a complicated barbarian. The idea of liberating Ivan and placing him on the throne, which had sprung from the desire of a poor man for luxury and affluence, soon assumed the proportions of a mission. He persuaded himself that it was no accident which had brought him to the Schlüsselburg, that the Hetman's words, the blabbing of the drummer, had not been accidental: he, Mirovitch, was chosen and ordained by God to liberate the poor Emperor and restore to Russia her lawful Czar. His poverty, his debts, his inferior rank, his lost lawsuit—all these were an endless chain of tribulations sent to prepare him for his mission.

In this disturbed and pathetic state of mind he encountered a comrade called Ushakov. Of all the riddles of the Schlüsselburg affair the identify of this Ushakov is the most puzzling. After one short conversation with Ushakov, Mirovitch knew that providence had sent this man to be his only possible ally. Under Ushakov's influence his vague schemes began to take tangible shape; together they inspected the ground plan of

the fortress, and discussed the strategic possibilities of overpowering the garrison. Ushakov drew up an order in Catherine's name, commanding the soldiers to hand over the nameless prisoner and, if necessary, arrest the governor; he also drew up the manifesto which the liberated Emperor was to sign and read out to the soldiers. After these practical arrangements had been made, the undertaking had to be blessed. Ushakov took Mirovitch to the church at Kazan, where they swore to each other and before God that they would carry out the sacred task of liberating Ivan not later than a week after Catherine's departure to the Baltic provinces, and that they would take no third person into their confidence. After this they had two masses read for their souls "as though they were already dead."

When he had given Mirovitch all possible instructions and completely involved him in the crazy undertaking, Ushakov disappeared. He was suddenly ordered to Smolensk by the War Ministry to take funds to the General-in-Chief. Mirovitch waited in vain for his return. Ushakov's hat and dagger were discovered on the banks of a river in the neighbourhood of Smolensk and the peasants reported that the corpse of an officer had been washed ashore and that they had taken it away and buried it. Ushakov had either been drowned or had disappeared in some other mysterious fashion.

Mirovitch still felt that he was bound by his oath, and believed that, single-handed, he would be able to carry out his plan. A few days after Catherine's departure, the first time he was left on guard at the fortress he called his soldiers one by one into the sentry-room, explained what he intended to do and asked them if they were prepared to help him. Each one replied: "If the others agree, then I will not stay behind." These interviews lasted until evening. Mirovitch decided to wait another two or three days in order to make sure of the soldiers, but at one o'clock that night he heard that three men had rowed away from the fortress; he thought he had been betrayed and saw only one way out: to act without delay, that very night. At half-past one he rose,

called the soldiers together, ordered them to load their guns, and stationed the sentries at their posts. The governor, Berednikov, roused by the noise of shouted commands, came rushing up, was dealt a blow with the butt-end of a rifle, and fell unconscious to the ground. Then Mirovitch and his soldiers crossed the canal to the inner fortress. Here, too, the commotion roused the sleepers, and a few minutes later the first shot was fired. About one hundred and twenty-four shots were exchanged altogether, but not a single man was wounded on either side! Finally Mirovitch ordered an old cannon to be fetched from the bastion and trained on the garrison; he himself ran to the cellar, fetched powder and loaded the cannon, but before he had a chance to fire it the white flag of truce was raised by the other side. Mirovitch rushed over the bridge into the casemate, carrying in his pocket the manifesto announcing Ivan's accession to the throne. All that was needed was Ivan's signature. The casemate was in pitch darkness. Mirovitch called for a light, somebody ran to fetch one; minutes passed, finally the light came, and Mirovitch was able for the first time to see the "lawful Emperor" for whom he had risked his life.

On the dirty floor of the casemate, in a spreading pool of blood, lay the corpse of Ivan. Vlashev and Tshekin stood grinning beside it. They had done their duty and carried out their instructions. "But should the enemy prove so strong that no other way of escape is possible. . . ." When Mirovitch had trained the cannon on the casemate walls they had promptly fallen upon the sleeping youth and stabbed him with eight sword-thrusts. Now they were free.

From the day of his unhappy birth Ivan had had to suffer for what other people wanted to do for him. His destiny was fulfilled at last: he had been butchered in cold blood because a man whom he had never seen, of whose intentions he was ignorant, whose very name was unknown to him, had wished to free him and set him on the throne. After a life spent in misery more hideous than that of the most wretched beggar simply because he had been born an Emperor, now that he

lay dead he received the recognition due to an Emperor for the first time.

Ambition and greed had long since deserted Mirovitch, he had become entirely absorbed in his new rôle of a fanatical legitimist. It never occurred to him to try and save his own life, which was now in danger. With tears pouring down his face he knelt beside the body of Ivan, kissed his hands and feet, had his corpse placed on a mattress and, followed by the whole garrison, carried across the canal to the outer fortress. There he ordered reveille to be sounded, and said: "See, my brothers, this is our Emperor Ivan Ivanovitch. But now we are very unhappy, and I am the unhappiest of all. You are innocent, because you were ignorant of my intentions. I will take all the punishment upon myself."

Then he went from soldier to soldier, embracing them. He had passed in this way through four ranks before it occurred to one of the soldiers to take away his dagger.

Catherine's journey through the Baltic provinces was a complete success. Everywhere—in Kronstadt, in Livonia, in Esthonia—she was given a triumphal reception, flowers were strewn in the streets through which her carriage passed, the Baltic aristocracy competed for the honour of entertaining the Empress and her retinue, and for half a day she drove in a six-seater coach, to which voluntary runners had harnessed themselves in place of horses. The Baltic population had every reason to appreciate their new Empress, who, in spite of her autocratic ideas, had a delicate understanding of the particular concessions due to these provinces which were by far the most civilized of her Empire. In Mitau, Biron, "her" Duke of Courland, received her on bended knees. This journey was a pleasant experience for Catherine, who in the past few months had suffered so greatly from manifestations of her unpopularity. It was also instructive, since it provided her with a great many new and fruitful ideas. The Empress visited the headquarters of Count Rumiantzov, inspected the Fleet and learned from the English ambassador

how utterly inadequate it would prove in a naval war; she discussed the progress of the hydraulic dock which was being constructed at the mouth of the Duna with General Braun, and formed plans for the completion of trade routes to the West. She was entirely in her element, never idle for a moment, absorbed in the present, planning a thousand projects for the future, buoyed up by her popularity, overflowing with friendliness towards everyone and infecting them with her own enthusiasm.

Then came the news of Mirovitch's revolt and the murder of Ivan. Her secretary, Yelagin, was present when she read Panin's letter. "Providence has given me a visible proof of her favour," she cried, "in providing such an end to this scandalous undertaking." She did not consider it necessary to cut short her journey; she remained in Riga for another week. She received several further despatches from Panin which were not all reassuring. It appeared that the world at large was not so ready to believe in Catherine's lucky star as she herself, and that Providence's proofs of goodwill towards her favourite had been somewhat lacking in subtlety.

"I am hastening to Petersburg," Catherine replied at last, "to terminate this affair immediately and to put an end to all foolish rumours."

She did not succeed in doing this, but it was no mean achievement to have kept her throne in the face of all these foolish rumours. It was no mean achievement either to have brought the Polish question to a victorious issue at such a difficult time, for the rumours were even more persistent beyond the Russian frontiers, where they roused open indignation, horror, and censure. The appearance of Mirovitch with his old cannon had been rather too opportune to seem altogether unrehearsed. Fate had managed things rather too well in the Schlüsselburg. Not only Voltaire but the whole of Europe saw these events in the light of a bloodstained historical drama, though not everybody was able to view them

with the shrewd detachment of a literary mind. A flood of brochures, abusive pamphlets, and lampoons was let loose against this hypocritical conniver at murders.

Nor did the trial serve to improve matters. Catherine handed Mirovitch over to the regular Court of the Senate with the following resolution: "As regards the insult to my person, I pardon the accused; but as for the attack on the general peace and welfare of the country, let the loyal assembly pass judgment." As a Christian, Catherine forgave her enemy, but as the Empress of Russia she demanded the traitor's head. The Senate had been willing to give her the heads of Gurchev and Chitrovo, whose only crime had been to talk, but at this trial Catherine was asked by a deputation to allow the fate of the accused to be decided by a majority vote. A more than disquieting symptom this: "the loyal assembly" feared that they might not reach a unanimous decision concerning the fate of a man who, with open force of arms, had plotted against the throne and life of the Empress!

The trial was conducted by Lieutenant-General Hans von Weymarn with every outward sign of impartiality and justice. Detailed records were carefully kept, accurately numbered, and have been preserved intact to this day. In those records there is nothing whatever to suggest that there was any kind of an understanding between Catherine and Mirovitch. Catherine only once interfered in the conduct of the trial, and that was when Tcherkassov demanded that Mirovitch should be tortured to induce him to confess the names of his accomplices; she ordered the cross-examination to be concluded without the application of torture. She had given the same order in the case of Gurchev and Chitrovo, and she was to repeat it over and over again in the future. She was opposed to torture, and on the margin of a memorandum, which stated that in special cases torture was unavoidable, she scribbled: "This is not to be tolerated. When humanity suffers there are no special cases!" But in this particular case, in the case of Mirovitch, her human principles brought her under suspicion: for was not this a man who might be the head of

a widespread conspiracy? The fact that she showed so little anxiety to discover whether Mirovitch had had accomplices led people to suspect that she feared his disclosures, or that she already knew who his accomplices were—perhaps better than he knew himself!

To suspicious minds all things are suspicious. Mirovitch maintained an attitude of great composure at his trial. He confessed frankly that he had plotted a "senseless and criminal attack"—he was a born gambler and he realized that the game was up. His calmness told against Catherine in the eyes of the suspicious, and she knew it. She knew that abroad people were saying: "Only the certainty that he will escape punishment can give a guilty man such composure"; she knew that the wiseacres who professed to see through this travesty of justice were convinced that an elaborate farce was being performed for the benefit of a credulous nation, and that even the ambassadors at her own Court were counting on a pardon for Mirovitch. It was this which cost him his life. For the first time since her accession Catherine signed a death-warrant and allowed it to be carried out before the eyes of thousands of curious onlookers.

But even this did not convince those who doubted her innocence. Anyone who had considered her capable of staging the Schlüsselburg insurrection in order to rid herself of Ivan would also consider her capable of sending her accomplice to the scaffold when his work was done, so that she need not fear betrayal. Even the Russian nation was not satisfied with the result of the trial. It accepted the death of the traitor Mirovitch coolly, but the simple and pious people could not understand why the murder of the innocent Ivan should remain unavenged, and why Vlashev and Tshekin should have been rewarded with a bar of gold for having "loyally performed their duty." Thousands who no longer remembered "Ivanushka," the crowned child, who had even forgotten whether he was alive, abroad, or dead, began to pray in secret for his poor soul. There was more discontent than of old, but there was no longer an object on which the

discontented could focus their desire for a change, no legitimate pretender, no one who could threaten actual danger to Catherine. She had lost in moral respect, but she had gained a thousand-fold in power and security. The dead do not return—no matter what the manner of their death. Ivan was dead and Catherine could say that he had been mad; Mirovitch was dead, and had taken his secret with him to the grave; Ushakov, who represented a questionable link between Catherine's wishes and Mirovitch's action, had disappeared without a trace. They were all locked in the impenetrable silence of the grave, and nothing remained of them save a neat bundle of documents, in which not the tiniest scrap of acceptable evidence could be found. The historian must rely on facts; there is no proof of Catherine's complicity in Ivan's death, therefore it would be a slander to voice such a suspicion. But the psychologist may express himself more freely. For him the question is one not of historical evidence, but of inner possibility. He would be doing no injustice to the woman who had burdened her conscience with the murder of her husband, were he to assume that—acting always in the fanatical belief that her motives were the highest—she might also have been capable of conniving at the death of Ivan: that she was, in fact, perfectly fitted to play the part which, according to Voltaire, she had enacted in the Schlüsselburg tragedy.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE MASKS OF PETER III

CATHERINE was an emancipated woman; she did not believe in ghosts. It was impossible that, like Macbeth, she should see the bloody spectre of her murdered husband at a banquet. And yet, figuratively speaking, this is what happened to her.

It was during the banquet given in honour of the Grand Duke Paul's wedding, in 1773. Almost ten years had gone by since Catherine's accession, and she could look back on a record of dazzling achievements. The peace treaty with Turkey was about to be signed, and it was certain that under pressure of the victorious Russian army Catherine's terms would be accepted without reserve. She had not wanted this war: Turkey had instigated it with the help of France in order to anticipate Russia's plan for annexing Poland; but once the war was under way no one had welcomed it more than Catherine. "I feel that a peace treaty would throw off a burden which defies the imagination," she wrote—and again: "Now the sleeping cat has been roused and it will not rest until it has eaten up the mouse." Catherine herself was busily engaged in swallowing the mouse. Her army occupied the Crimea, her fleet had annihilated the Turkish fleet at Tchesme, her flags were fluttering in Sparta and Athens. Voltaire compared her campaign to Hannibal's march on Rome. She already pictured the Black Sea open to her trading ships, visualized trade routes to Persia, caravan roads to China, and at a slightly more distant future a peaceful Greece under Russian rule. Her authority in Europe was already enormous and was causing lively anxiety to her Western neighbours, Prussia and Austria, but she had pacified them by allowing them to participate in the first division of Poland; she had

silenced Frederick II and Maria Theresa by stuffing their mouths with slabs of the "Polish cake," while she herself swallowed six thousand square miles of territory with nearly two million inhabitants. She was still unpopular in Austria on account of the Oriental question. Maria Theresa, that virtuous bigot who invariably referred to the adulterous Catherine as "*cette femme*," was still alive, but before long the Austrian minister, Kaunitz, was writing behind her back: "The Russian Empress's political programme is a masterpiece of statesmanship, admirable in conception and well considered in every detail; it cannot be sufficiently praised."

With such a record of triumph to her credit, Catherine need hardly have feared her son's majority. Who would wish to interrupt so dazzling a rise of prosperity, or cut short a reign in which so many men were finding opportunities of distinguishing themselves, which offered so many openings for brilliant careers? Efficient soldiers could advance to the highest positions in the army, clever business men could make fortunes; architects, painters, sculptors were overwhelmed with commissions, generous grants were made to writers and musicians. Ability of any kind was strongly encouraged, acclaimed, and extravagantly rewarded. Catherine's patronage of the arts put all other European princes to shame, her bounty exceeded even that of the most cultivated Court, the French. Two years previously Diderot had been faced with the painful necessity of disposing of his valuable library. Catherine heard of this and came to the embarrassed philosopher's aid in a most delicately tactful manner; she made an offer for the books on condition that they remained in Diderot's care and keeping until his death, and in return for looking after them he received a yearly stipend sufficient to relieve him of all financial worry. Grimm and Voltaire, too, received yearly pensions from her. She seemed to possess a magic formula for manufacturing ready money to scatter as largesse, despite the long war and the heavy expense of maintaining the army and the fleet. She was surrounded by happy and contented faces, all the letters she received were couched in flattering

and exuberant phrases. Voltaire called her Minerva, the Semiramis of the North, the Mother of God. The Russian poet Diershavin composed wistful verses in which he likened the state of the country under her rule to a heaven upon earth. She believed that she was contentedly governing a contented nation.

The arrival in Petersburg of Paul's bride, the little German Princess who, as a convert to the Greek Church, received the name Natalie Alexeievna, coincided with that of two other illustrious visitors, Diderot and Grimm. Those were glorious days for Catherine. Her brilliant mind, which received little enough stimulation from the unlettered people who surrounded her, revelled in hours of philosophical debate; she was paid compliments as subtle and extravagant as her natural vanity demanded, and had the satisfaction of knowing that the cosy talks in her private study with these two charming gentlemen would be relayed all over Europe and preserved for posterity. And how she could talk—with the grace of a Parisian hostess, the animation of a Southerner, and the logic of an intelligent and educated man! She once started a discussion with Grimm that lasted for seven hours without a break, and while it was in progress nothing and no one was allowed to interrupt them. Diderot sometimes so completely forgot that his *vis-à-vis* was the Empress of Russia that he frequently slapped her on the back in the heat of the argument.

As she sat at her son's marriage feast Catherine remembered with justifiable pride the day—thirty years before—when she herself had arrived from Germany, as poor as the little Princess Natalie, to become the bride of the Russian Grand Duke. She was now a woman of forty-four, still overflowing with vigorous health, with plump, rosy cheeks, sparkling eyes, buoyed up by her good fortune, more exacting than ever in her desires and demands. She still had dreams in plenty that remained unfulfilled, Heaven be praised, for otherwise she would have felt really old. There was the presumptuous young King of Sweden, whose hands she had hoped to tie as Poniatovsky's had been tied by the nobles of his own country, but who had outwitted the nobles with the help of French gold.

There was Voltaire's suggestion of "supping in Constantinople" with Maria Theresa. Here eyes fell compassionately on the little Princess Natalie; Catherine was determined to be a better mother-in-law than Elizabeth had been. But then Natalie was hardly likely to become a future Catherine. There was no need for that. All that was required of her was to bear children, sons. Catherine would bequeath a kingdom to each of her grandsons, however many there might be. Who indeed could presume to check her triumphal progress?

In the midst of the celebrations, when her happiness was at its height, Catherine received news that a man who called himself Peter III had appeared in the south-eastern provinces on the border of the Urals, that he had many enthusiastic followers, that the local authorities were powerless against him, and that the ranks of his supporters were swelling daily in the most alarming manner.

The man was an impostor, of course. Catherine was an enlightened woman, she knew that Peter was dead, and that the dead do not return. But the inhabitants of the Urals and the middle Volga provinces were not enlightened, they were a superstitious, credulous race composed of illiterates, Cossacks, army deserters, escaped convicts, and peasants. They believed that Peter III had escaped his murderers, remained in hiding, and had now returned. They were willing to believe any fairy story because—and this was the terrible thing—they were discontented. Their lives were so wretched, their desire for betterment so great, that they blindly followed anyone who promised them an improvement of their conditions.

The man who called himself Peter III was an impostor, but his following was a very genuine one. It was made up of the Don Cossacks, who had been deprived of their old freedom and forced into detested military service, of the clergy who since the confiscation of church property had become mendicant beggars overnight, of the sectarians who were tolerated by the crown but unmercifully exploited by avaricious state officials, of the peasants whose horses, sheep and cows

were seized to provision the troops, of unprofessional soldiers who had been recruited by conscription, of thieves and those who were innocent but who had been condemned to the Katorga without a trial, and—outnumbering them all—of the vast army of disillusioned, weary and half-starved serfs. The old nomadic urge woke in immigrant Asiatic tribes which had never been quite absorbed by semi-civilized Russia; Bashkirs, Kirgirs, Kalmuks shook off the hated yoke of enforced labour on foreign soil and marched against this strange and hostile government. It was the people themselves who were in rebellion and who, in the space of a few months, had won nearly half the country to their cause: the people whose name was forever on Catherine's lips but whose existence she had entirely forgotten in her triumphant conquests. The people had gained nothing by the glorious expansion of the country, though they had paid for the wars with their life's blood. Why should the illiterate peasant, who had not even mastered the Russian alphabet, be impressed by the fact that Russian flags were waving over the Acropolis? What did he care for the magnificent palaces of Petersburg and Moscow, the exquisite paintings by Dutch and Italian masters with which the Empress had adorned the Hermitage, when he was not allowed to leave his tiny strip of native soil? What benefit could he derive from the writings of French philosophers which the Empress paid annual sums of thousands of roubles to have translated? What did he gain from the activities of foreign scholars who scoured the country making maps and measuring altitudes and temperatures? The people's condition had never been worse, for it was they who paid for the Empress's elaborate and ambitious undertakings though they did not know how it was done: the magic formula by which Catherine was able to obtain unlimited supplies of money was the bank-note press. She printed as many rouble notes as she required, and the value of the rouble diminished in proportion, the price of bread rose, taxes rose, the ruthlessness of the tax officials increased.

Catherine had always boasted that the "will of the people" had overthrown Peter III and put her on the throne, and she

believed, too, that she could justify Peter's murder in the name of the people. She had concerned herself more with the people's welfare than all Russia's previous rulers put together. She had spent three years composing her famous *Instructions*, a work which was to act as a guide to the legislative assembly of 1768, and which was imbued throughout with the highest political and social ideals. Tears of emotion sprang to the eyes of the assembled deputies when they heard these *Instructions* read aloud, but they made no attempt to put them into practice. The question of serfdom was left severely alone; a handful of Bojars had threatened to cut off the head of the first speaker who broached the subject. Even the traffic in individual peasants could not be abolished because Catherine, with Orlov and a few other philanthropists, were in a minority. The peasants not only remained tied to the soil, forced to work for a master who had absolute legal power over them, but it was still permissible to tear them singly from their families, husband, wife, or child, and sell them like cattle. The commission talked a great deal but made few resolutions, and of those which it made only a few were passed—in many of the remoter provinces they were never even heard of. An unbridgeable gulf yawned between Catherine's good intentions and the people themselves. There were innumerable obstacles, the interests of the landowners, the corruptibility and avarice of the state officials, the slowness of the bureaucratic machine, the ignorance of the judges, the greed of the clergy—all abuses which Catherine had to fight, against which she was powerless, and for which she herself was responsible. And now the people, whose will and happiness had always been her moral justification, were flocking about a man who had assumed the mask of Peter III. This mask was as terrible an omen to her as the spectre of Banquo to Macbeth, for through it there peered the hatred, hostility, and open rebellion of her people; it was the bald and unflattered reflection of the people's will.

The man who called himself Peter III was Emilian Pugachev, a former Cossack several times convicted of desertion. In

the course of his many flights from the military authorities he had sought shelter with enemies of the government, fellow Cossacks, peasants and sectarians; he had an intimate knowledge of the Ural country and the lower Volga; he knew the people and their state of mind. He was one of them, a fugitive, oppressed as they were; in him there burned the brooding resentment of the disinherited, the hatred of the outlaw for the law, the ferocity of a cornered beast snarling at its tormentors. All this pent-up emotion was negative, destructive, and as unorganized as the masses who were inflamed by it. They had no constructive idea, no plan for the future, the eighteenth-century workers were still unconscious of their own power. This lack of confidence was illustrated by the fact that the leader of these vast masses dared not own he was one of them, but in order to bind the various rebellious elements more closely to him and gain authority in their eyes was obliged to assume the name of the Czar, Peter III.

Pugachev bore no resemblance whatever to the weakly ash-blond Peter. He was tall and muscular, his black hair grew low on his obstinate forehead, and a thick black beard framed his hard and determined chin. When he first embarked on his revolutionary career he affected modest, monk-like garments, lived the life of an ascetic, ate moderately, never drank, and declared that he was seeking power not for himself but for his beloved son, the Czarevitch Paul, whose picture he was often seen to press to his lips with tears in his eyes. That was all humbug, but his hatred of official abuses, his love for the oppressed, was genuine enough. Behind his innumerable wanton and heinous crimes shone the pure flame of an outraged sense of justice. "If God permits me to reach Petersburg," he used to say, "I shall put my wicked wife Catherine into a convent, I will free all the peasants and exterminate the nobles down to the last man."

Pugachev was a revolutionary and his followers were revolutionaries, but since they swept on without organization or discipline, without any constructive political programme, simply in a frenzy of hatred against the existing order, they



GREGORY ORLOV



PUGACHEV



BESTUSHEV



PAUL PETROVITCH



resembled a vast robber band. They were an army numbering many thousands, obliged to take by force whatever they needed—arms, food, and money. They plundered villages, dragged horses and carts from the stables and piled them with such provisions as they could lay hands on; they pillaged whole cities and set fire to them at the least show of resistance, sometimes too from sheer lust of destruction. Since they were inadequately supplied with weapons—most of them were armed only with sticks and flails—they resorted to methods of terrorization. They invaded farm after farm, inciting the peasants to slay their masters and take possession of their houses and lands. "Peter III, who has returned, tells you that the wealth of these people was won at the expense of the peasants. Now he has come to your aid. Whoever hears these tidings shall pass them on in the same hour of receiving them and spread the news of this great mercy among the whole of mankind." Pugachev could neither read nor write. His manifestos were passed from mouth to mouth, and they spread like wild-fire. Peasants slew their masters if they had no time to fly to the woods for safety, city after city opened its gates to the rebels, clerical bondsmen and even civic officials hurried to meet them with bread and salt. The copper miners in the Ural district left their work to join the rebels, brought them back to the mines to seize all the available metal for making cannons and ammunition, and thus won a tactical advantage over the poorly equipped government troops. The danger of this uprising was at first underestimated in Petersburg, and later the outbreak of the Turkish war prevented active measures from being taken. Fortress after fortress fell to Pugachev's army, the government troops were decimated by the fanatical resistance of the rebels and even more so by the number of deserters who went over to them.

Once the instincts of violence and greed were unleashed, violence inevitably became an end in itself. Robber bands that had no connection with Pugachev sprang up all over the country, pillaging and burning in his name, tying landowners up to trees, abducting women, and completing the general

disorder. These hordes swept over the countryside like countless swarms of locusts, leaving ashes, ruin, and desolation in their train. How little these mushroom revolutionaries cared for the future, how little the thought of ruling the country they were so successfully terrorizing entered into their calculation, was proved by the fact that it never occurred to them to reconstruct where they had destroyed: in the year of terror, 1774, nearly a third of Russia presented a picture of ruin and devastation.

Pugachev was as incapable of coherent action as his followers. His newly won power went to his head, like the wine from the stolen casks which he now habitually drank with his immense meals. He had exchanged his simple monkish garments for a flamboyant scarlet uniform; his "palace" in the principal quarter of Berda was only a farmhouse, but inside the walls were covered from floor to ceiling with gold paper. This deserter, whose hatred of military discipline had made a revolutionary of him, decorated his followers with medals torn from the tunics of dead officers; this man who had sworn to exterminate the nobility bestowed titles upon his friends. Though he was Catherine's sworn enemy he called his best friend "Count Orlov," another "Vorontzov," and a third, an ex-robber who had lost his nose in a fight and therefore habitually wore a net over his face, "Count Panin." And since no Court is complete without its ladies, he collected a few dozen raw village girls and beat them till they learned to drop curtsies and address their "Emperor" with fitting respect.

There was something uncanny and ghostly about this childish game of make-believe played among blackened gallows and smoking ruins. It is almost inconceivable that Pugachev should disgrace his noble Cossack features by hiding them behind the mask of the miserable Peter III, that the leader of such a gigantic revolutionary movement should spend his days in aping the absurdities of a fashionable Court. The awe-inspiring Pugachev, about whom the story was told that he had cut off the heads of thirty thousand men single-

handed, was also an ingenuous child, taking his pleasures with companions of equally violent and simple mentality in a fairy-land made of gold paper.

Among the officers whom Pugachev captured were some who could write and even speak foreign languages. He could now issue real manifestos, signed "Peter III," and since a terrifying executive force lay behind these manifestos they were taken as seriously as those which were issued by Catherine. If she attempted to enlighten people's minds as to the real identity of this "robber-chief Pugachev," he pressed the claims of his legitimate rights as against those of his assassin-wife. If she ordered punishment to be meted out to those who recognized the false Peter, he decreed the gallows or the wheel for those who recognized the usurper Catherine. Since the fortunes of war changed rapidly in many districts it frequently happened that executions took place at dawn in the name of the Emperor and at sundown of the same day in the name of the Empress. The harrassed townsfolk, who often could not tell whether they were being interrogated by rebels or government troops, had a stock answer in reply to the question of whom they considered the lawful heir to the throne, which was: "The party you represent."

In the summer of 1774 the rebel army was larger than any enemy force that had ever threatened the peace of Russia. And this army was stationed in the very heart of the country itself. It mattered little whether the government troops gained a victory here or there, re-took a fortress, captured a few thousand rebels, or seized a few dozen cannons; the fire, extinguished at one point, broke out with renewed violence elsewhere. Pugachev's victory was won not by arms, he prevailed after the manner of an epidemic, by contagion. He was still several thousand miles from Moscow, but already the hearts of hundreds of thousands of serfs were beating faster in anticipation of the arrival of their longed-for liberator. Often at night a cry of "Long live Peter III!" would ring through a deserted, pitch-dark street.

In the autumn of 1773 Catherine had offered a reward of

two hundred and fifty roubles for Pugachev's head. Now she was offering a hundred thousand roubles. It was an ominous proof of the growing strength of the rebellion.

Catherine had never really understood the people; it was a feat entirely beyond her powers. Like her teachers, the Encyclopædists, she saw "the people" as the mass of the non-aristocratic and non-privileged classes; she was entirely unaware that social distinctions existed within that mass, and when she encountered the face of the newly-evolving fourth estate peering through that of the third, it appeared to her as a grotesque caricature. In her letters she refers to Pugachev's following, which was drawn from widespread districts of her empire and composed of a variety of types and nationalities, as a "rabble." At this point, where her capacity for organization and construction broke down, her gift of human understanding also failed her, and she confused cause with effect. She felt instinctively that this lower class, for which the term "proletariat" had not yet been invented, represented a force inimical to the peaceful bourgeois revolution which she wished to accomplish during her reign. But because she refused to abandon her idea of benefiting the people, all those who refused to be included in her particular scheme of benefaction were labelled not "the people" but "rabble," work-shy and malignant criminals who were beyond help or salvation.

It was perfectly true that this "rabble" was delaying the people's deliverance by forcing the Empress to join forces with the nobles and property-owners. Since Pugachev's strength lay not only in armed force but in the support of an entire section of the population, it was necessary to pit another equally solid and determined class against him. Peter Panin, Count Panin's brother, was sent to the rebellious provinces with full authority to enlist the nobles in a united resistance against the rebels. Since the support of the aristocracy was urgently needed, all their privileges, particularly those of absolute power over their serfs, were endorsed by the crown.

This pooling of interests on the part of the government

and the property-owning classes was a natural and obvious step. Peter Panin's mission met with swift success, the nobles subscribed all that they could collect in the way of soldiers, money, and other necessities, and the food shortage—for the land, laid waste, provided the rebels with neither bread nor cattle—was in their favour. Secret sympathizers were intimidated by Panin's energetic measures, which were hardly less severe than those of Pugachev. He, too, took recourse to the gallows and the wheel. In vain did Catherine repeatedly beg him to show mercy and indulgence wherever possible, Panin had been given unlimited authority and he made full use of it. Within a few weeks hunger, fear, and several decisive military victories had broken the power of the rebels.

Pugachev stood out to the last. Hopelessly beaten, he swam across the Volga with a handful of friends, but even among these there were some to whom a hundred thousand roubles meant more than honour. They fell upon their leader while he was sleeping and delivered him bound and chained to the military authorities. Pugachev was taken to Petersburg in an iron cage like a wild beast. Catherine would not allow him to be tortured, but ordered that sentence should be passed at the first word of confession he uttered. When he was condemned to be drawn and quartered alive she changed this sentence to one of simple execution.

There was no turning back for Catherine after the alarming experiences of that year. She could never forget that ten years after the beginning of her reign the people had risen against her and admitted before the whole of Europe and to posterity that they preferred Peter III to the Empress Catherine. She would never forget that "the rabble" had nearly cost her her throne, which had been restored to her by the nobility and the property-owners. Her whole future attitude was determined by this. There was to be no more talk of the people's "rights" in the Montesquian sense. The Empress did her best to improve their conditions in the interests of

the country's welfare, in so far as such an improvement could be reconciled with the privileges of their betters. The question of serfdom had become taboo, but landowners were encouraged to treat the peasants with greater consideration than before, and efforts were made to educate the magistrates and the clergy, for the Empress was now convinced that mass freedom could only flourish in soil that had been prepared by mass education. She was not, however, deluded into the belief that a single age—even one that was dominated by an invincible Empress—could bestow the priceless gift of "enlightenment" upon a race of illiterates.

Peter III had reigned only a few months, his marriage with Catherine had not been a true marriage, yet his memory continued to haunt Russia for decades, and to prey upon Catherine's mind. He was constantly cropping up in the guise of various pretenders; as Pugachev he had disputed her right to the throne for a second time, and for the second time she had destroyed him. After this disastrous débâcle it was hardly likely that another enterprising lunatic would feel inclined to impersonate the ill-starred Peter, destined for misfortune even in his re-incarnations. And yet he confronted Catherine for a third time—in the person of her son, the Czarevitch Paul.

All contemporary records, Catherine's own confessions, and Peter's admissions, point to the fact that he was not the father of Paul, but in a mysterious fashion the boy grew up to resemble him more and more in every way. Catherine's lover, Saltykov, had been a strikingly handsome man, but the Czarevitch was ugly in the same way that Peter had been ugly. As a child he had been exceptionally pretty, but an illness contracted in his tenth year had twisted his features and the affliction persisted until it completely distorted his face. That was easy enough to explain, but how explain his curious resemblance in character to the dead Peter? Why was he mistrustful, irritable, boastful, and cowardly, as Peter had been, why did he exasperate his mother in precisely the

same way that Peter had exasperated Elizabeth, why should he take a delight in exercising a handful of soldiers at his Summer Palace instead of attending to affairs of state, and why, having been born in Russia and taught to love his country, did he despise and belittle all things Russian? How could the horrified Catherine, who was concerned not only as a mother for her son's future, but as an Empress for the future of her kingdom, explain the symptoms of dawning insanity in the Czarevitch's behaviour when she knew that Saltykov had been a sane and healthy man to the day of his death? Had she been superstitious she must have supposed that the vengeful ghost of Peter III, defying all the laws of heredity, had taken possession of the boy's body so that he might challenge her to a last duel.

There was something uncanny about this resemblance, though it had a very obvious psychological explanation. Paul had grown up under the same disadvantages as his nominal father; his youth, like Peter's, had been overshadowed by the tyranny of a despotic woman. There had never been any pretence of a genuine and tender love between Catherine and her son, her maternal instincts had received their death blow when the boy was torn from her as a tiny baby; now, as Empress, she regarded him merely as her successor, in the same way that Elizabeth had regarded Peter. But even her feelings towards her successor were mixed; as her heir she wanted him to be great, yet unimportant so long as she herself was still alive. For this reason she was perpetually finding fault with him, at times he was too childish for her liking, at others too independent, she accused him of paying insufficient attention to serious matters, then of interfering in things that did not concern him. In this matter Catherine, usually the most just and even-tempered of women, displayed the same instability and capriciousness as her predecessor Elizabeth, and Paul's early youth was repressed in the same way that Peter's had been. He might, of course, have fought against these restricting influences, but there was a second important factor at work.

Once when Paul was on a visit to Vienna, a famous actor

refused to play Hamlet in his presence, "because in that case there would be two Hamlets in the theatre." (Joseph II presented him with fifty ducats for this pointed quip.) Paul, of course, discovered at an early age how Peter III had met his death. The sight of the Orlovs at the Russian Court, the knowledge of his mother's passionate relationship with Gregory Orlov, had shattered his sensitive youthful soul. Later, other men stepped into Orlov's shoes, Paul saw Potiomkin grow all-powerful; he was forced to treat nobodies like Mamonov, Korsakov and Lanskoi with deference simply because they happened to be leaving his mother's bedroom. Sons are always the sternest judges of their mothers' morals, and Catherine's morals disgusted Paul. The older he grew, and the clearer his vision became, the greater was his disgust. At the same time his lonely young heart, his adolescent need for someone whom he could respect, his strongly developed sense of justice, made an idol of his murdered father. Of the many scandalous stories which he heard at Court concerning the unhappy marriage of his parents he believed only those which were told or invented to Catherine's shame and Peter's credit. With his mind thus biased, Peter's behaviour appeared to him to have been consistently fine and admirable. Half wishing to resemble his idol, half wishing to annoy Catherine, half deliberately, half unconsciously, he began to model himself on Peter, and in time became almost his double.

Rumours of his illegitimate birth had naturally come to his ears as well. Prince Golovin tells a story of how Catherine, having intercepted an indiscreet correspondence between her son and a friend, sent for Paul and told him point-blank that his prospects of inheriting the throne depended entirely on her own discretion; she said: "If I must choose between an ungrateful son and my faithful subjects I shall not hesitate for a moment to disclose the whole truth." This anecdote is of doubtful veracity, but in any case Paul would hardly have trusted his mother's word; his pride of heredity forced him to believe her virtuous in this instance. In order to feel

himself a true Romanoff and the legitimate heir to the throne, he had, in spite of all rumours, to accept and honour Peter as his father. This gossip was simply another reason to make him parade filial devotion more openly, and go out of his way to accentuate his resemblance to Peter.

The little Princess Natalie was not destined to become a second Catherine, but that was not for lack of a love of political intrigue nor from any excess of marital chastity. A few months after her wedding she was having an affair with the young Count André Rasumovsky and discussing with him the possibility of overthrowing Catherine. Paul regarded the young Count as his best friend, exactly as Peter had done in similar circumstances. A story is told that when Rasumovsky could find no other way of being alone with the Grand Duchess, he put large quantities of opium in Paul's food, thereby laying the foundations of his future insanity.

News speedily reached Catherine's ears of her daughter-in-law's adultery, which in itself would have been a matter of complete indifference to her; but she also heard of the childish conspiracy against herself, and this made her decide to open her son's eyes as to the true character of his friend. Paul was passionately in love with his wife, and, since he did not love his mother, he refused to believe her. Then Natalie died in giving birth to her first child. Evil tongues laid her death also at Catherine's door; she is alleged to have said to the doctor: "If anything happens to her, you will pay for it with your head"—a threat which caused that gentleman to keep well out of the way at the moment when his presence was needed. It is a malicious legend. Catherine was genuinely distressed at the Grand Duchess's death because for the moment she saw no prospect of acquiring a grandson. When she realized how deeply Paul was stricken at the loss of his beloved wife, she decided to cure him by allowing the clandestine correspondence that had passed between Natalie and Rasumovsky to fall into his hands. As it happened, this proved to be the best possible cure. Paul flew into a mad rage, and

a week later declared himself ready to take a Würtemberg Princess as his second wife even before the year of official mourning had elapsed.

It was necessary in the circumstances that he should approach the lady himself to ask for her hand and, being an obedient son, he travelled to Berlin to bring back the wife whom Catherine had chosen for him. He brought home, however, not only the Princess Marie, but a fanatical admiration for Frederick II. This was just at the time when Russia was anxious to strengthen her relations with Austria in order to further her schemes for annexation in the East, and to loosen her ties with Prussia. This meant nothing to Paul. His infatuation for the Prussian king became so strong that the Empress, reminded of Peter III's abject enslavement, cried out in horror: "I can see that after my death Russia will become a Prussian province!"

When he was Grand Duke, Peter had carried on a secret correspondence with Frederick II, and Paul now began to do the same. It was not a treasonable correspondence, for Russia and Prussia were not at war, but it annoyed Catherine extremely, because she knew that Frederick's dearest wish was to see his admirer, Paul, in her place on the throne, as formerly he had longed to see Peter reigning in Elizabeth's stead. Her attitude to her son, which had so far been merely one of coldness, now became actively hostile. She excluded the Prussianized Grand Duke from all her activities, concealed her plans from him, regarded him with suspicion, and had him perpetually watched by spies. She ordered him to travel to Paris, Vienna and Italy with his wife. In Vienna the Czarevitch heard the news of the Russian-Austrian alliance from Joseph II's lips—his mother had not considered it necessary to inform him of the projected treaty. Later she bought him an estate at Gatchina, where, like Peter III at Oranienbaum, he was forced to lead a life of mental and spiritual stagnation: he passed his time in tormenting a handful of soldiers with endless Prussian drill, spent hours designing new uniforms, and raged helplessly against his mother.

Certain past events were now to repeat themselves with uncanny consistency. When Paul's first son was born, Catherine, to whom all the tender joys of motherhood had been denied, formed a passionate attachment for the child, which was christened Alexander. She did not take complete possession of him as the impulsive Elizabeth had done of her child, but she had him brought to her for several hours each day, and in the same way that she exercised the magic of her personality on countless men and women, she succeeded in winning the boy, diverting the whole of his childish love to herself, and totally estranging him from his parents. She was a devoted and doting grandmother, and there can be no doubt that the little Alexander knew the best side of the great Catherine. When he was brought to her, she would break off whatever conversation or work she was engaged upon, and lie on the floor with him for hours, inventing the most enchanting games, which they played together; she taught him to read, and designed a comfortable garment for him that would not hamper the movements of his little limbs. Her letters to Grimm are full of ecstatic comments on the little fellow's prowess: "If you only knew what wonders Alexander achieves as a cook, a shopkeeper, an architect, how he paints, hangs paper, mixes colours, chops wood, cleans furniture, how he plays at being the groom and the coachman, how he is teaching himself to read, draw, calculate, and write!" She composed scholarly essays for the guidance of Alexander's teachers, wrote fables and fairy-tales for the child's delight, and invented a special alphabet that began with the maxim: "All human beings, whether they be Grand Dukes or beggar children, come into the world as little naked monkeys." She planted the old ideals of liberty and equality, long since withered in her own breast, in the receptive mind of the child. When she encouraged little Alexander to believe in the essential goodness of man she forgot that she herself had entirely lost that belief. Her second grandson, Constantine, when he was born was less dear to her than Alexander; he was a delicate child, and she feared he might not live. But eventually

she lost her heart to Constantine as well, and he too was drawn entirely under her spell.

The love between Catherine and her grandsons would have been idyllic if it had not entailed a conspiracy against the intervening generation. Catherine was more than ever anxious to exclude her son from the succession, and to know that Alexander, her grandson and spiritual heir, would take her place on the throne of Russia, and Paul in turn felt his son growing daily into a more formidable rival. If Catherine saw Paul as a mysterious reincarnation of her hated husband, he saw in his growing son the counterpart of his hated mother. He had every reason to hate her. She stood between him and the throne, she had deprived him of his sons, whom she was teaching to become his enemies. In Vienna he had seen how another mother, and one who had a rightful claim to her throne—Maria Theresa—afforded her sons unlimited opportunities for making themselves useful, yet he was forced to realize that any handsome officer of the Guard who happened to take his mother's fancy had more authority in matters of state than the rightful Czar. It was only natural that this grievance, born of an outraged sense of justice, and growing more bitter each year, should have made him unfair to Catherine. He could not judge her dispassionately. All her decrees seemed to him to be bad ones, all her actions destructive; he mistrusted her, mistrusted her friends, her ministers, her flatterers, he even mistrusted his own friends because he suspected them of being in Catherine's pay. Wherever he looked he saw enemies, spies, hired assassins; he mistrusted his own sons and suspected them of desiring and plotting his death. He frequently dismissed his guards and even guests whom he had invited, because he feared that they would murder him. He remained entirely aloof from the Court, neglecting to attend even such celebrations as his own name-day and the anniversary of Catherine's coronation. It was a complete and open rupture.

This obsession of hatred had so many reasonable causes that it is difficult to decide when the first signs of insanity appeared to stamp it with tragedy. "He is mad," Catherine

said, when Paul told one of her trusted friends that he would cut off his head as soon as he came to the throne; "but unfortunately he is not mad enough to enable one to protect Russia against him."

She was not able to protect Russia. The day after her death Paul's madness displayed itself openly for the first time: before he ascended the throne which his unworthy mother had "desecrated," he ordered the body of Peter III to be exhumed and had his mouldering bones, which could be identified by nothing save one boot, carried in solemn state through the streets; he forced the aged and feeble Alexis Orlov to walk at the head of this gloomy procession behind the corpse of his victim, and finally caused the skeleton to be set upon the throne, as a symbol of the legitimacy of his succession. The crown of Russia resting on a grinning skull—here, in a single second, Shakespeare's eternal vision of the human drama had appeared to confound the smiling children of the Age of Reason.

## CHAPTER XII

### POTIOMKIN, OR THE CYCLOPS IMPROVISES

IN the winter of 1773, at a time when the rebels were marching in full force on Moscow, when the war with Turkey had flared up afresh, Catherine could joke in her letters to Voltaire about the Sultan, the Grand Vizier, and the "Marquis de Pugachev"; but there was one man of whom she stood in real terror during that uneasy year, and that was Gregory Orlov. She had dropped him, and she feared his revenge.

He had exhausted her patience at last. She had loved him for ten years, with a love that was a record of endless and unbearably humiliating forgiveness. She rewarded him with kindness for every hurt he did her; it was common knowledge that his mistresses had nothing to fear from her—on the contrary, through Orlov they could obtain all manner of favours from the Empress. A senator who wished to divorce his wife because she was having an affair with Orlov was summoned to a private audience by Catherine and presented with a magnificent estate in Livland as an inducement to follow the Empress's own example and forgive his erring partner in silence. In 1767 she wrote to Madame Geoffrin: "When your last letter arrived, Count Orlov happened to be in my room. You say that you admire me because I pass laws with one hand and do needlework with the other. He, the laziest of men, though he has an excellent brain and natural gifts which he does not use, cried out: 'Yes, that is true!' This was the first word of praise I ever heard from his lips. And I owe it, Madame, to you!" Orlov not only betrayed his royal mistress, he was so niggardly in the expression of his love that she was touched and moved by the smallest word of praise.

Yet his power and that of his brothers had steadily increased. The Orlovs had no voice in state matters—all attempts in this direction had been nipped in the bud by the indispensable Panin—but Catherine was perpetually giving them opportunities to distinguish themselves. And on the whole she had no need to regret it. The Orlovs were not highly intelligent, they were simple and impetuous children of nature, but as such they could prove themselves extremely useful on occasion; they had shown the Empress again and again that they were ready to dare anything, whether for good or evil.

Alexis Orlov had been appointed Chief Admiral of the fleet during the Turkish war, though he had never in his life set eyes on a battleship. His training proved expensive but it paid for itself in the end. Even if the victory of *Tchesme* was due chiefly to the experience and ability of two Englishmen—Greig and Elphinstone—who had entered the service of Russia, the Chief Admiral deserved credit for having put the right men into the right positions, and Alexis accordingly received the highest military decoration—the order of St. George—not without merit, from the hands of the Empress. The coins which were struck in commemoration of his victory did not however satisfy his vanity. On his return to the Mediterranean he commissioned an Italian artist to execute four large oil paintings representing the destruction of the Turkish Fleet, and when the painter complained at the difficulty of the task, saying that he had never seen a ship in the process of explosion, Alexis immediately provided him with an object lesson by ordering a ship to be burnt in the harbour of Livorno. At this time he also found another opportunity for displaying his ruthlessness. A certain young adventuress had appeared in Italy proclaiming herself the daughter of the late Empress Elizabeth and her lover Rasumovsky, and as such the legitimate heir to the throne of Russia. She was not a dangerous enemy, but nevertheless a grave nuisance to Catherine, for even in diplomatic circles there were credulous people ready to listen to the abominable stories she told about the Russian usurper. Catherine wanted to have her taken

prisoner, and Orlov carried out her wish. He made the acquaintance of the unfortunate adventuress, pretended to fall violently in love with her, and promised that, if she would honour him with her hand in marriage, he would overthrow Catherine and put her on the throne of Russia. He wooed her with such convincing ardour that she actually promised to marry him on the day after her coronation. As his official affianced bride she frequented Italian society with him, and one day unsuspectingly accepted his invitation to visit the Russian squadron lying at anchor in the harbour. She was rowed out in a gaily decorated boat, music floated from the deck of the first ship they approached, and a luxurious arm-chair was lowered to hoist the lady on board. As soon as she set foot on the deck, however, she was clapped into irons, thrown into the ship's hold and conveyed to Petersburg where two years later she died miserably in prison. All this was done with Catherine's sanction and for her sake, but she still had good reason to tremble at the thought that the Orlovs' violence might one day be turned against herself.

She had preferred not to send her lover Gregory to the Turkish wars because she could not bear to be parted from him for any length of time, but she had found another way of turning his courage and resourcefulness to account. In 1771 the plague was brought to Moscow by soldiers returned from the front. To avoid a general panic the military authorities stupidly forbade the dread disease to be mentioned by its true name, so that it was merely referred to as an epidemic of "aggravated fever." This ruse had the effect of preventing any steps that might have been taken to check the pestilence; it spread with alarming rapidity, the people, half-mad with terror, struck down the doctors in the streets and, with the deadly germ already in their veins, flocked to the image of the Holy Virgin that hung on the gates of the Kremlin, believing that it had the power to cure them of their sickness. The Bishop of Moscow, realizing the danger of these massed gatherings, had the image removed, and was literally torn limb from limb by the infuriated mob. At this point in the

crisis Orlov appeared in the infested and uproarious city. He feared neither the people nor the plague. He forbade all public gatherings and saw to it that his orders were carried out to the letter. Confirmed fatalist that he was, he went about visiting the sick and supervised the burning of everything that had been contaminated, household goods and clothing. A staff of competent doctors and the arrival of winter combined to aid him in his work. When he returned to Petersburg he rode through a triumphal arch bearing the inscription: "To him who saved Moscow from the plague."

A year later Catherine sent him to Fokshani to assist at the peace negotiations with Turkey. On the day of his departure she wrote to her friend Frau Bjelke in Hamburg: "He must appear to the Turks as an angel of peace in all his great beauty." The following day she heard of a fresh and particularly humiliating infidelity of Gregory's: he had seduced his thirteen-year-old cousin, the little Zinoviev. Catherine flew into a passion of mingled unhappiness and jealousy, as she always did when she heard of these lapses, but this time Orlov was not there to obtain her forgiveness, to heal the wound with a word, or a kiss. There were, however, others who had something to gain by widening the breach and making it final—Panin and all those who desired the downfall of the proud Orlov. They directed Catherine's attention to a handsome young officer named Vassilchikov. "It was a random choice made out of desperation," Catherine wrote later; "I was more heart-broken at this time than I can say." But she had made her choice, and she was determined at all costs never to return to the wretched bondage of her passion for Orlov. Vassilchikov became "Adjutant General" overnight, he was installed in the apartments that were connected by a secret passage with the Empress's bedroom and received a present of a hundred thousand roubles and a monthly salary of twelve thousand roubles. His duties consisted in accompanying the Empress on her drives by day and remaining near her at the card tables throughout the evening, so that he might be ready to offer her his arm the moment she had finished playing.

His routine was stricter than that of any other high official. He was not allowed to leave the palace without special permission, nor was he allowed to make or receive visits. Catherine was determined to suffer no repetition of what she had endured in the past. She was terrified of giving way to the softness, the tenderness, the "womanliness," that must lead inevitably to dependance and enslavement. The pendulum swung back in a mighty half-circle displaying the full sweep of her dual nature: she, too, could "love like a man," could be more masculine than any man, could force her partner to play the woman's part, humiliate and possess him in the very act of surrender.

When news reached Orlov at Fokshani that Catherine had appointed an official successor in his place, he forsook the Congress, jumped into a sledge and sped post-haste to Czar-skoe Selo. The official delegate of a world power broke off the peace negotiations of his country without a moment's thought in order to regulate his love affair with the ruler of the country. But he failed. Catherine, who knew Orlov as well as she knew the palm of her own hand and was expecting his impetuous return, sent a messenger who intercepted him just outside Petersburg with instructions that he was to proceed to his Castle at Gatchina. Elaborate negotiations were then begun, in which Orlov at first refused to participate. He insisted on seeing Catherine, for however short an interview, even if it was only an hour, but this was the one thing Catherine was determined to avoid. His letters to her became more urgent, beseeching, and finally threatening. Catherine was frightened and ordered the guards outside the palace and her own apartments to be doubled. During a masked ball the whisper went round that Orlov had just driven up, where-upon the Empress caught up her skirts, and ran from the ballroom with undignified haste to seek refuge in Panin's private study. It was not Orlov's murderous passion she feared, but his amorous passion which she knew so well and for which she still hungered. She was fleeing in terror not from Orlov but from her own desires, and she was prepared to buy her release at any price. She offered Orlov the title of

Duke, a gift of a hundred thousand roubles with which to build himself a house in Moscow, and the loan of any of her summer palaces until the house should be ready for his occupation, as well as a yearly income of fifteen thousand roubles, six thousand serfs from any crown province he might name, and innumerable costly presents—silver plate, and the furniture from the apartments he had occupied at Moscow. All this she offered in exchange for his promise as a gentleman that he would not appear at Court for one year. Her essential nobility of character is expressed in the manner of their parting: as an autocratic Empress and a wronged woman, she had both the power and the provocation to punish, banish, or destroy this man who had betrayed her most tender trust so often and so cruelly. Instead she loaded him with presents and begged him almost pitifully for a single boon: her peace of mind.

That was difficult enough to regain in any case. Vassilchikov could do little for her, except spare her the humiliation of appearing as a deserted woman by dancing constant attendance on her. She had always had a horror of being pitied; she was satisfied that the whole of Europe should regard her as a capricious woman who had tired of her lover and appointed a younger man in his place. She would gladly have deceived herself as well as the world, but that she could not do. "His (Vassilchikov's) tenderness made me weep," she confessed later. She was unable to feel even a fleeting passion for the handsome youth. "I was nothing more to her than a kind of male cocotte," Vassilchikov wrote, "and I was treated as such. If I made a request for myself or anyone else she did not reply, but the next day I found a bank note for several thousand roubles in my pocket. She never condescended to discuss with me any matters that lay close to my heart." Catherine treated none of her later lovers with such cold disdain. Poor Vassilchikov had to pay for Orlov's sins, but it was reserved for another man to take Orlov's place.

When Orlov returned to Court two years later that other man had already arrived, but Catherine received her former

lover with open arms, she was an affectionate, maternal friend who had forgotten all wrongs and remembered only the services that Gregory and the other Orlovs had rendered her. Gregory expressed a wish to marry his cousin, the little Zinoviev, a union which was forbidden by the laws of the Greek Church, but Catherine as head of the Church made the marriage possible and gave the young couple glowing letters of introduction to use on their honeymoon journey abroad. When Orlov died in 1783, with his mind completely deranged, she wrote to Grimm: "Although I have long been prepared for this sad event, it has nevertheless shaken me to the depths of my being. People may console me, I may even repeat to myself all those things which it is customary to say on such occasions—my only answer is strangled tears. I suffer intolerably."

A rich nature may experience a number of strong emotions simultaneously. While Catherine was "suffering intolerably" over Orlov's death, another man was claiming her passion, and, before that, while she was being tortured by Orlov's unfaithfulness, she had already begun to take a lively interest in the career of the young officer who had offered her his sword-knot on the memorable evening of her accession to the throne, who had ridden with her through the pale and glorious night towards victory, and who afterwards had accompanied the defeated Czar on his journey to Ropsha. Soon after she came to the throne she had made Potiomkin a lieutenant, then lord of the bedchamber, and she frequently invited him to the smaller and more intimate gatherings at the Hermitage, for he had a gift which she esteemed above all others—he could make her laugh. He had a special talent for mimicry; he could send Catherine into convulsions by his impersonations of the grave and pompous dignitaries of the Court and, which amused her even more, of herself. She had no inkling then that this man possessed other qualities besides the power of making her laugh.

In any case she was soon deprived of his society, because he had a quarrel with Alexis Orlov, presumably over a game of

billiards, in the course of which the hot-blooded Alexis knocked out his eye. Potiomkin was inconsolable at his disfigurement, and believed that he would never be able to return to Court. He departed for the Turkish wars where, armed with a personal introduction and recommendation to General Rumiantzov from the Empress herself, he soon became Lieutenant-General, a promotion which he did very little to deserve. In this new capacity he had one day to take an important message to Catherine, who received him with that graciousness which she could show indiscriminately to everyone and which had the effect of persuading everyone that he had been singled out for special favour. Potiomkin was by no means the type of man she admired. He would not have been counted handsome, even had a second intelligent and passionate eye glowed in his left socket. His face was pear-shaped, the wide cheekbones protruded beyond the broad forehead, the long hooked nose was anything but Grecian in shape and contrasted oddly with the soft, sensual mouth; he was tall and massive in build, as Catherine liked her men to be, but he was badly proportioned, he lacked grace of movement, and his hands were definitely ugly—large, clumsy paws with the nails bitten almost to the quick.

What were Potiomkin's feelings as he tendered his report to the Empress? Fierce hatred of the Orlovs was smouldering in his breast. The injury which Alexis had done him had remained unrevenged for Gregory's sake, but he knew the Orlov's most vulnerable spot, and here within reach of his hand was an opportunity of striking home. With his single remaining eye Potiomkin had already seen that the Empress was tired of Vassilchikov. He saw a possibility, and that possibility set his imagination aflame. He hurried off at once to Catherine's friend, Countess Bruce, and confessed to her that he was madly in love with the Empress; he swore—and he really believed what he said—that he would retire to a monastery when the Turkish campaign was ended, since he saw no way of escaping this overwhelming passion except by renouncing the world of the flesh.

Potiomkin was no Orlov to achieve success fortuitously. He was without doubt a genius, though it is difficult to pin his genius down to any one particular quality. His greatest asset was a vivid personality which in a crisis served to cover his many faults, and could bowl over far more experienced and capable men by the sheer force of its impetuosity. As a boy he had always said that he would become either an archbishop or a cabinet minister. At one time, when a theological student at the newly opened Moscow University, he had been presented to the Empress Elizabeth as the pride and ornament of his school. Two years later he was expelled for "systematic failure to attend lectures." His enthusiasm for work alternated with periods of intense laziness. His ambition was boundless but variable; at times it would sweep over him with compelling force filling him with energy, enthusiasm, courage, and a host of brilliant ideas, only to disappear at the first hint of failure and be replaced by black despair and a genuine desire to renounce the world for a life of cloistered asceticism. He was first and foremost a visionary. His dreams were so vivid that he was able to persuade not only himself but others of their reality.

It would be futile to attempt to analyse the nature of his passion for Catherine. It existed, and in such an overwhelming measure, that it instantly declared itself to her, through the agency of Countess Bruce. Catherine entered into a correspondence with the young officer, who had by this time returned to the front, and allowed him to woo her in his letters. He sent her poems which were a mixture of oriental extravagance and peasant simplicity. At the same time he succeeded in distinguishing himself at the battle of Silistria, so that he was able to draw a romantic parallel between his love and his prowess as a soldier: he vowed that life held only two alternatives as far as he was concerned—to die, or to win the favour of his exalted mistress.

"When you read this letter," Catherine wrote in reply, "you may ask yourself for what purpose it was written. I can only say: in order to prove to you how much I think of you and always wish you all that is good."

When an Empress neglects her many pressing duties to write a letter about which the recipient must ask himself why it was written, the explanation is not far to seek. No sooner had Potiomkin received this precious note than he left post-haste for Petersburg. He gave Catherine no opportunity to act like a man who is about to take a new mistress. Before he saw her he begged her in a passionate letter—as he might have begged another, more ordinary woman for her hand—for the position of Adjutant-General. The same day Vassilchikov was sent on a journey, and Potiomkin was permitted to offer the Empress his arm and lead her to her bedroom.

"Why do you reproach me," she wrote to Grimm, who was a trifle alarmed at this sudden change, "because I dismiss a well-meaning but extremely boring bourgeois in favour of one of the greatest, the most comical and amusing characters of this iron century?" Potiomkin was still "comical and amusing" before all else in Catherine's eyes. One might almost have supposed she was writing of a new Court jester instead of her new lover, if one had not known that she esteemed humour above all other qualities, that this woman who had known and committed so much horror, who accomplished more real work in a single day than ten men put together, yearned for nothing so whole-heartedly as gaiety and laughter.

But Potiomkin was able to do more for Catherine than merely amuse her. He worshipped her as none of her lovers had ever worshipped her before. Orlov had never praised her; Potiomkin spent hours on his knees admiring her fine skin and pink cheeks. His poetry restored the vanished bloom of youth to her face and charmed away the growing fullness of her contours. He was as voluble as Voltaire, and expressed himself with the fiery ardour of an Asiatic. Orlov had been taciturn, harsh, and domineering; Potiomkin overwhelmed her with tenderness, showered her with so many thoughtful attentions that for the first and only time in her life she forgot to be the giver and became a real woman

allowing herself to be spoilt by a real man. It was true that Orlov had occasionally felt the need to give something in return, and one day he had bought a diamond worth four hundred thousand roubles from an Indian Maharajah as a present for Catherine. The diamond was too large even for an Empress to wear, so it was put away in the royal treasure chamber, where it remained, an expensive and extremely unimaginative present. Potiomkin proved himself to be a past-master at the art of choosing presents that were valued not for their cost, but rather for their superb uselessness. He sent Catherine roses from Italy in the depths of winter, and a basket of ripe cherries on New Year's day. An officer by the name of Bauer was sent all over the world looking for rare oddities with which this fanciful lover might delight and surprise his mistress—a fine sterlet from the Amur valley, a dancer from Paris, a violinist from Rome, a vine of rare and delicious grapes from the Crimea. This officer, who spent most of the year travelling, instructed his friends, in the event of any accident befalling him, to place the following epitaph on his tombstone: "Here lies poor Bauer, faithful servant of his master. Onward, coachman, whip your horses faster!" Of course the money which paid for these extravaganzas came from the Empress, but Potiomkin's poetic fancy created a world of romance in which such prosaic details dwindled to insignificance. His masculine pride had no need to protest against the social superiority of his mistress, he simply waved a magic wand and it ceased to exist, just as the tiny wrinkles at the corners of Catherine's eyes ceased to exist when he refused to see them. He was a man, and insisted on playing a man's part; he might compose songs to his mistress's beauty, but he made no attempt to appear pleasing in her eyes. He would often appear before her barefoot, with uncombed hair, in a none too clean dressing-gown, and he never left off biting his nails. She once presented him with a costly service of Sèvres with a note inscribed: "To the world's most inveterate nail-biter."

But even this great love was by no means idyllic. From the

very beginning they quarrelled almost daily. Potiomkin's temperament was not calm and cheerful like Catherine's. The least word, the slightest contradiction, would make him gloomily determined to abandon both Catherine and Court life for ever. He was also madly jealous. He was not content to be Catherine's lover, he wanted to possess her wholly and utterly. He waged an embittered and not entirely praiseworthy feud against her friends and advisers, a mere fleeting glance at some other man was enough to send him into a white-hot passion, and at such moments he would completely lose control of himself, his face would grow scarlet, he would smash whatever came to his hand, fling the grossest insults at Catherine, and stamp out of the room in the middle of a conversation slamming the door loudly behind him. At first Catherine was reduced to despair by these moods, she bombarded her angry lover with notes, swearing to love him and only him to the end of her life. Some of them were nothing but a string of endearments: "My Grishifitshenska, my little dove, my golden pheasant, heart of my heart . . ." or of equally loving reproaches: "Cossack, Barbarian, Giaur, Tartar. . . ." He was not always easy to reconcile, sometimes he would sulk obstinately for days on end. He would avoid Catherine, locking the door of his room against her, or, if she announced her visit, he would send for some Court buffoon and detain him until Catherine, exhausted and thoroughly out of temper, finally swept off to her own apartments at midnight. Once he sent her a sheet of blank paper in reply to a conciliatory letter. "It is not the first of April, that you should send me a blank page," she wrote back, determined to end the quarrel at all costs. "Perhaps you had a bad dream, or perhaps you wish to make sure that you do not spoil me too utterly. But since I do not understand your moods, I do not understand the meaning of your silence. Yet I am full of tenderness for you, Muscovite, Cossack, Pugachev! Tom-cat, peacock, raging lion!" She was never seriously offended; the very violence of his anger, the unreasonableness of his jealousy, proved his love. "If we loved one another less, we should be far wiser and far happier

too." Nevertheless these perpetual quarrels caused her a great deal of unhappiness, for she could never endure being "angry" with her lover for a whole night; she needed cheerfulness and tranquillity. "Be gay," she wrote to him over and over again. In the early days of their love she had gone out of her way to discover the reasons for his anger and to clear away any misunderstandings, but in time she realized that the reasons were never important, since it was Potiomkin's character which was at fault. "You simply like quarrelling," she wrote to him. "You preach to me that we should live in perfect harmony and have no secrets from one another, yet in the same breath you find some new bone of contention, for tranquillity is a condition unacceptable to your nature." Sometimes—but very rarely—Potiomkin admitted his fault and made the first step towards a reconciliation.

"Allow me, dearest, to tell you how I imagine that our quarrel will end. Do not be surprised that I am anxious about our love. In addition to the many benefits you have showered upon me, you have bound me to your heart. I wish to occupy that place alone, and to rank above all who have gone before me, for no man has ever loved you as I do." Catherine wrote on the margin of this letter: "Grant that his thoughts may grow calm and his feelings regain their freedom. They are tender and will find the best way for themselves. End of the quarrel. Amen."

Potiomkin's relationship with Catherine was unlike Orlov's, for it was Potiomkin who loved uneasily—Catherine herself was possibly more attracted by his passionate love than by the lover. But it soon became apparent that something more than physical passion was giving distinction to this affair, which not only surpassed all Catherine's other love affairs, but constitutes a unique document of devotion in the history of all time. "They must love one another greatly," Senator Yellagin remarked to a distinguished traveller, "for they have even grown to resemble one another." This was an extraordinary flash of insight, for outwardly there was little enough resemblance between the two: between the Empress, emancipated,

liberal-minded, the personification of order and punctuality, who was so moderate in all things that her guests rose hungry from her table, who never drank a drop of alcohol and whose daily routine was regulated with the precision of clockwork—and Potiomkin, a half-Asiatic by blood, who spent his days lounging on a divan, his nights in drinking, whose gluttony is still a byword in Russia, and who rounded off the wildest debauches with a sincere prayer of repentance. One has only to compare their hands—Catherine's, white, small-boned, well-cared-for, and Potiomkin's, raw-boned, with bitten finger-nails—to recognize the difference between them. Yet an experienced palmist might have found in the hands of both the same secret sign that is borne only by world conquerors.

In 1774, quite soon after the beginning of their affair, Catherine sent her lover to Kutchuk-Kainardi to sign a final peace treaty with the Turks. "Ah, what a good head the man has!" she wrote to Grimm on this occasion. "No one deserves greater credit for this peace than he, and this intelligent creature is as amusing as the devil!" It was the last time Potiomkin's gifts as a humorist were emphasized, for at last Catherine was beginning to appreciate his real qualities.

Potiomkin's ambition was as uncompromising as his love; it would brook no half measures. The customary rewards—orders, favours, gifts of money and sinecures—which automatically went with the position of Adjutant-General, did not satisfy him; he wanted real power and an unrestricted field of action. He had himself elected to Catherine's Council, became assistant Minister for War, and almost overnight, War Minister. It was no enamoured weakness on the part of Catherine that secured him all these posts—she was genuinely convinced that in Potiomkin she had discovered a unique genius whom she was placing at the service of the country. In a sense she was right; she had succumbed to the lure of a man who, in spite of being completely inexperienced, never failed to make his personality felt. Potiomkin made many mistakes, which were promptly and energetically pointed out by his enemies; other

men might have made fewer in his place, but only because they would have attempted less. Of Potiomkin's numerous schemes many miscarried, some involved grave losses, others were abandoned half-way, but the man himself was an elemental force that galvanized the slow and indolent Russians into unwonted activity.

It is difficult to imagine Catherine without Potiomkin during the latter half of her reign. The Pugachev rebellion and the final collapse of her illusions concerning liberty and emancipation had robbed her of her first fine political enthusiasm. She saw nothing ahead but the task of organizing a police state with the help of the nobility, and forcibly suppressing all revolutionary movements among the people. This need not, of course, prevent her from carrying out a few incidental social reforms; she could build hospitals and orphanages, increase the number of factories, encourage industry—a useful but by no means inspiring programme.

It is in the nature of love to find its fulfilment in a trinity. Middle-class love finds fulfilment in the child; the love of these two, whose common bond was ambition, realized itself in a dream of ruling the world. They might quarrel over trifles, but when they spoke of Constantinople they were of one mind; when they called the Crimea by its ancient name of Tauris, they spoke with one voice; when they visualized Russia dominating Europe and Asia, nothing could spoil their dream—not even jealousy. Their lust for power grew fiercer with each passing day, and their interest in mere amatory passages waned in proportion.

If he had remained merely Catherine's lover, Potiomkin would never have performed great deeds; they were both too exacting in their demands as lovers. While he occupied the apartments and fulfilled the manifold and exacting functions of Adjutant-General, Potiomkin led a life of extreme indolence, which in spite of its glamour and advantages could never have satisfied his restless, haughty spirit for any length of time. No one at Court observed any cooling off in their passion and yet, overnight, their relationship took on a new

and strangely bizarre form: without having fallen from grace, Potiomkin suddenly left Petersburg and travelled to the South on business. He had renounced Catherine's body so that he might keep her soul, that insatiable, power-loving soul, for ever. "That great man whose name is Catherine," Voltaire had once called her. It was with this "great man Catherine" that Potiomkin sealed a deathless pact against the whole world. But he also knew the weak, womanly Catherine, and because he was loath to leave her to the mercy of chance and the machinations of Panin, he himself appointed Peter Zavadovsky, the youngest of Catherine's secretaries, to succeed him in that intimate position which he had voluntarily relinquished, but which he did not cease to control. He corresponded regularly with the Empress, and the tone of his letters was as tender as if there had been no such person in the world as Zavadovsky. When he returned to Court a year later, he advised Catherine to dismiss her Adjutant-General and appoint a certain Zoritch in his place, simply to prove to himself that Zavadovsky counted for nothing while he, Potiomkin, was still of supreme importance. Catherine agreed to the exchange without a murmur. The experiment succeeded, the break was made, Potiomkin had proved that he was master. He was prepared to lay at his mistress's feet whatever she desired and he approved—fortresses or flowers, provinces or paramours. Others might sleep with her, but he remained the keeper of her dreams.

It was not until she said good-bye to sentiment, in the person of Potiomkin, that Catherine's amours took on that abnormal and exaggerated character which scandalized the whole of Europe and gave her the reputation of a Messalina. Her earlier relationships had all been affairs of the heart, such as any healthy, spirited, and uninhibited woman might indulge in, and a great many well-born ladies of the eighteenth century did. She had genuinely loved Saltykov, Poniatovsky, Orlov, and Potiomkin, she had had interests in common with each of them, and not one had seen her pass out of his life

without pain and sorrow. Even her affair with Vassilchikov, whom she had "taken out of desperation," can hardly be accounted in her own words as "frivolous debauchery" for which she confessed she had "no tendency." She was perfectly right in this. The very fact that she was fundamentally far too serious for debauchery made this rapid succession of six lovers appointed partly with Potiomkin's consent, partly at his command, a degrading chapter in her life. The whole business was a painfully organized and methodically regulated routine of vice, lacking in any compensating grace. In her philosophical writings and her correspondence, in her dealings with politicians, generals and crowned heads, Catherine retained an astonishing degree of feminine charm to the end of her life, but in her love life the already dominant streak of masculinity became more and more marked.

She was no longer young when she entered upon this period of excesses; she was just forty-six, and twenty years later she was to die on the morning following a night of love. She had put on weight until finally her body became coarse and shapeless; her fleshy hips bore heavily on her slim ankles so that they grew swollen, and her light, elastic tread became ponderous. Her features still retained traces of beauty; when she spoke her eyes sparkled with their old fire, and when she smiled her unconquerable charm triumphed over the years. But in repose her face was stern and betrayed the true character of the Empress, it was dominated by the strong chin, and by two deep perpendicular lines between the brows that spoke of years of arduous and concentrated work. Her mouth, of which Poniatovsky had written that "it seemed to pine for kisses," had grown thin-lipped. The face of a commander-in-chief on a matron's body—that was how this insatiable voluptuary might best be described.

The men of her choice were invariably handsome, well built, and—first essential—young. Zavadovsky was twenty, Plato Zubov, her last lover, was more than forty years her junior. Catherine was vain, but she was not stupid. She had been able to believe Potiomkin when he said that he would retire

to a monastery for love of her, but she could not possibly believe in the sincere passion of all the young officers who clustered round her card table every night hoping to attract her attention. She knew precisely the value of what she had to give, and the worth of what would be offered in exchange. This was proved beyond a doubt by the manner in which a new favourite was selected. The young man in question was summoned to the palace without warning and subjected to a thorough medical examination by the Scottish physician, Rogerson. He then spent several days being prepared for his new office by Catherine's friends, Countess Bruce and Mademoiselle Protassov, a function which earned those two ladies the nickname of "*les éprouveuses*." The medical examination may have been a necessary precaution, but the process of subjecting the prospective candidate to a test of his powers indicated not only profound contempt, but the desire to express that contempt openly, to degrade the chosen man to the status of a robot, to make him ridiculous. The same attitude was expressed in the manner of his dismissal: he was told to go without warning and obliged to pack up and leave the very same day without again setting eyes on the Empress. He was allowed to choose his own destination, and at the first post station along the route he found a large sum of money and a number of other costly presents awaiting him.

In spite of these drawbacks the post of Adjutant-General was eagerly sought after and remained so to the end of Catherine's life. Dozens of handsome young fellows obtained commissions in the regiment of Body Guards, whose duty it was to keep guard inside the palace, so that when Catherine went from her study to her royal reception rooms, or, at night, from the reception rooms to her bedroom, she passed through a double row of picked specimens of manhood. The members of the Body Guard were aristocrats, though not all of the first nobility. The dismissal of a favourite was always the signal for a flurry of intrigue, and sometimes hand-to-hand fights for the privilege of conveying a message or petition to the Empress and thereby coming under her notice. Ministers,

diplomats, *chargés d'affaires*, courtiers, the whole personnel of the Court, had no other thought than to offer their advice and "influence" to the favoured man; for days or even weeks the vast machinery of government would lie idle, all decisions would be postponed, while every eye anxiously followed the eyes of the Empress. Whom would she choose? At such times the Empress would be tired, lethargic, disinclined for any effort. It seemed as if some vital impulse were lacking in her, as if the mainspring of her indefatigable energy had collapsed; she complained of all manner of pains, her letters were despondent, she felt old, worn out, burnt up—until suddenly at the sight of a young, smooth face the hidden spark caught fire, and the whole complicated machinery was once more set in motion.

This state of affairs was the result of fifty years of petticoat government. Ever since the death of Peter the Great in 1726, Russia had been ruled, except for a few months, exclusively by women. The social order and patriarchal tradition on which the state was founded had remained unaltered, but the Court itself, that inner circle which revolved about this regiment of women, bore unmistakable traces of their feminine influence. Catherine's predecessors had been no more virtuous than she; they had all kept their official favourites besides a number of less permanent lovers for whom the Russian language has coined a word: *Vremientchik*—"the man of the moment." Things were no worse in Russia than anywhere else, but with this difference, that the rôles of the sexes were reversed. The Russian Empresses had their *vremientchiks* just as the French kings had their mistresses; both were symbolical of the autocracy and loose morals of the eighteenth century. But the futility of generalizing on sexual psychology may be judged from the example offered by these two Courts. While Catherine grew more masculine in her attitude toward her lovers as her power and independence increased, while she took the men who pleased her with a shameless disregard of their youth, paid them and, when she wearied of them, dismissed them, a generation of young men sprang up

whose highest ambition was to catch the Empress's fancy by virtue of some physical endowment, and by counterfeiting passionate love secure favours which could not be elicited by any other merit. These men had nothing in common with Potiomkin, whose imagination had flung him headlong into real love; they were a generation of male courtezans, with the blandishments, the shamelessness, the calculating coldness and petty vanity peculiar to that profession at their finger-tips. It was no mere chance that contemporary travellers in Russia were all struck by the fact that the women of the upper classes were far better educated and more cultured than the men, while the men devoted greater attention to their personal appearance and wore clothes of gorgeous, colourful materials, designed to accentuate the details of their figures, particularly the turn of a well-shaped leg. It was an emasculate, effeminate generation that set no value on courage or intellect, that had only one thought—to make a quick and easy career by a rich marriage, or—highest hope of all—by filling the post of Adjutant-General to the Empress. These men had none of the masculine scruples that had once plagued Orlov; Catherine's new favourites were proud to take money and jewels, houses and estates in return for no greater service than the questionable gift of being able to send a corpulent old lady to sleep. If they took any part in public affairs their motives were those of the French royal lights-of-love: they had no real interest in politics, they had no ambition, they simply did so at the bidding of friends and relatives anxious for lucrative positions, who, when the royal whim changed, would be expected to provide permanent support for the ex-favourite. Catherine was generous to her lovers. She might quarrel with her cook over an expensive flour bill, but she gladly squandered millions to satisfy the extravagant demands of these arrogant youths.

For between the humiliating appointment of a new favourite and his humiliating dismissal, her strong imagination and vitality would invariably get the better of her determination to remain detached: in the end she always fell in love with her

favourites, took an interest in them, was jealous of them, and allowed herself to be persuaded that each one of them was genuinely devoted to her. A current of warm, motherly affection mingled with the stream of her passion, and something, too, of the spirit of the great classical lovers: she pampered, indulged, and idolized her favourites, but at the same time she tried to educate them. Of Rimsky-Korsakov, who had ordered an enormous library to be built for him and in reply to the question as to how he wished it to be stocked, replied: "Oh, you know, the big books on the bottom shelves and smaller ones on top!" Catherine wrote to Grimm: "You ask me whether I am in love with him? What a word to use when speaking of 'Pyrrhus, the King of Epirus'! Wonder and exaltation have gone to the making of this masterpiece of creation. He is the despair of painters, the unrealized dream of sculptors. He makes no gesture, no movement, that is not graceful and noble. He sends out warmth like the sun, he is radiant, he is all harmony, the personification of every precious gift with which nature in an orgy of prodigality has endowed a single human being. . . ." But Korsakov was dismissed by Potiomkin as Zavadovsky and Zoritch had been, and Lanskoi took his place. He retained it for four years, and these were the best years of Catherine's life. Of all her love affairs, that with Lanskoi was the warmest and most maternal, or perhaps paternal is the word, for as usual she was the man of the two. Lanskoi was feminine in the best sense of the word; he was gentle, affectionate, faithful, modest, and not unduly ambitious. These four years of companionship coincided with the four most peaceful years of her rule, so that the contented Catherine could allow her natural inclinations, her love of gaiety and her genuine devotion to intellectual pursuits free play. She wrote half a dozen comedies which, though they do not rank as masterpieces, are nevertheless competent, well-constructed plays, full of spontaneous humour and original ideas. These comedies were performed at the Hermitage, and sometimes Catherine herself acted in them. *The Deceiver* and *The Dupe*, two

satirical farces levelled against Cagliostro, were also presented at the principal theatre of Moscow under a pseudonym, and brought their author—if Catherine's reports to Grimm may be trusted—a considerable sum in royalties. It was during this peaceful period that Catherine contributed articles to the *Organ of the Friends of the Russian Tongue*, a journal published by Countess Dashkov. It had taken the little Dashkov a long time to recover from her disappointment in Catherine both as a friend and an Empress, but eventually she brought herself to accept the position of a governor of the Academy of Science. After years of estrangement the two women picked up the threads of their broken friendship. Catherine made use of the paper to publish a number of satirical articles under various pseudonyms, ridiculing persons who had displeased her or replying to attacks against the Government. This pleasant and absorbing occupation was cut short by the sudden death of Lanskoï at the age of twenty-six, some said from the effects of an over-strong aphrodisiac. Catherine was beside herself with grief. She, who in the midst of the most appalling catastrophes had always found the courage to write humorous letters to her friends abroad, wrote to Grimm: "A deep affliction had overwhelmed me, and my whole happiness has fled. I thought that I should die after the irreparable loss of my best friend. I educated this young man; he was gentle, tractable, grateful, and I hoped he would be the support of my old age. . . . I have become a desperate, monosyllabic creature. . . . Everything saddens me. . . ." She remained faithful to the memory of the departed Lanskoï for nearly a year. But this lachrymose widowhood was not to Potiomkin's liking, he needed a Catherine who was happy and optimistic, receptive to new plans and ideas. He finally succeeded in cheering her by producing the handsome Yermalov. A year later the new favourite offended him; he swore to drive out the "white nigger" and did so. His place was taken by Mamonov, and within a few weeks Catherine was so infatuated with her new darling that she nearly exploded with anger and jealousy because her daughter-in-law had the temerity to

invite him to dinner. On another occasion the French ambassador arranged a banquet in Mamonov's honour, and though Catherine could not forbid her love-prisoner to accept the invitation she spent the entire evening driving up and down outside the French Embassy in her carriage. In spite of her vigilance it was a long time before she discovered that Mamonov had fallen in love with one of her Court ladies. Immediately she fought down her jealous anger and proved that her generosity was still as great as her need "not to be without love, even for an hour." She gave her sanction to the marriage, superintended the dressing of the bride in her own apartments before the ceremony, and sent her off loaded with rich gifts. "I have received a bitter lesson," she wrote at sixty-five. "But may God bless them and send them happiness."

Catherine had never dismissed a single one of her *vremientchiks* out of boredom or a desire for change. Most of them had been driven away by Potiomkin, one had died, and one had deserted her. She was not frivolous by nature, but she could not endure solitude and throughout her whole life, to the day of her death, she never lost the rare capacity of being able to fall in love afresh with each new lover.

But all these affairs, which ministered to her passionate nature and her constant need for enthusiasm, were in reality nothing but variations on the theme of her great and indestructible relationship with Potiomkin. She might praise her lovers to the skies, rifle the state coffers for their pleasure, be consumed with jealousy or maternal solicitude on their account—in the face of Potiomkin's wishes they were no more than chaff before the wind. She and Potiomkin never quarrelled over the dismissal of a favourite; his presence, his will, a few contemptuous words casually dropped, were enough to destroy the illusion of love which he himself had created. These youths who filled Potiomkin's place, while he moved restlessly from one adventure to another, were simply part of the entertainment he devised to keep the Empress amused; like the rest of his improvisations they were short-lived, but splendid and expensive. The six favourites with whom he

supplied Catherine in the course of fifteen years cost the country, according to one contemporary estimate, approximately fourteen million roubles, of which a large part found its way into Potiomkin's pockets, for he graciously permitted each of the young men to reward his patronage to the tune of two hundred thousand roubles. This was a mere fraction of what he received from Catherine's own hands and directly from the treasury, a sum that must have run to nearly fifty million roubles.

That is a great deal of money; one may confidently say that Potiomkin was grossly overpaid for his services to the state. It was, moreover, scandalous that a man should be able to enrich himself to such a degree in less than twenty years. But, just as it is impossible to think of the mature Catherine without Potiomkin, it is impossible to imagine Potiomkin operating on any but the grand scale which his personality demanded. He lived the life of an independent Prince; he had his own Court, his personal body-guard, his courtiers, secretaries, and sycophants. His palaces were more gorgeous than those of the Empress and decorated with a far more extravagant and barbarous taste. His entertainments surpassed hers, for he was not bound by stiff French etiquette but dared to give his exuberant, oriental imagination full rein. He was a man of pleasure, an enormous eater, who denied his senses nothing. His palaces were built of costly marble, his feet sank into the thickest carpets, the best musicians were engaged to perform for him, the finest chef in the world pandered to his palate; he was as famous for his sterlet soup as for his deeds. He read a great deal, preferably Plutarch, but in his library there were volumes bound in hogskin whose pages consisted of thousand rouble notes. He spent most of his time dressed in a loose *khalat* with his bare feet thrust into slippers, but when he gave a banquet he would appear in the most fantastic garments, and he owned different sets of jewels to match the colour of each costume. He was adored by women and had countless mistresses. The conservative nobles might laugh at the barbaric Asiatic, but women responded

instinctively to the primitive force of this one-eyed giant. He would leave no stone unturned in his efforts to please a woman, and he very often took advantage of his position to win them. It happened quite frequently that respected men would offer him their wives if they needed his assistance or had some guilty secret, and whether or not Potiomkin accepted their offer depended entirely upon the attractions of the lady in question.

But, like everything else, women were only incidental in Potiomkin's life. He would fall violently in love with a lady of high rank, bombard her with passionate letters and expensive presents; he had to have what he wanted—he had what he wanted, and when he had it it bored him. A few days later he could be found consorting with disreputable women in some squalid quarter of the town, or, having flung himself into his *kibita*, driving madly southwards to seek the company of Cossacks and Tartars, to eat raw turnips and onions and sleep with them in barns. He quickly wearied of the magnificent palaces which were built to his own design and decorated under his personal supervision; no sooner were they completed than he sold them for far less than they had cost him, and started building afresh. Days of lavish feasting would be followed by nights of black despair; the voluptuary of yesterday would lie tousled and half-naked on his untidy bed sunk in dreams of renouncing the world and retiring as a nameless monk to some monastery. When this mood was upon him he refused to speak to anyone; letters, petitions, memorials, urgent despatches accumulated on his desk, and all visitors, even ministers and foreign diplomats, were refused admittance. In spite of his brilliant achievements he was an unhappy man, moody and restless; he could not bear to give up anything, yet nothing really satisfied him; he grasped at everything but could hold nothing. He was a primitive creature, creative and at the same time destructive. All his actions bear this characteristic stamp: he planned a thousand projects only to abandon them half-way; those which were effective survived, the others lapsed into forgotten obscurity.



GENERAL FIELD-MARSHAL



PRINCE POTEMKIN TAURIN, G.G.

*Generalissimo of the Russian Armies,  
and Governor-General of the Kingdom of Georgia.*

*an Imperial Russian Nobleman  
and member of the Academy of Sciences.*

Portrait of Generalissimo Potemkin, painted by Vasily Zhukovskiy, 1789. The portrait is a copy of the original by Vasily Zhukovskiy, 1789. The original is in the collection of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

POTIOMKIN



This strange man remained faithful all his life to two women. One was his niece, Countess Branicka, a humble, submissive little creature who was his companion on all his journeys, devoted and silent as a dog. She did not worry him with jealousy when he was feeling strong and well, nor with unwanted sympathy when he was depressed—she was simply there, offering her warm, human companionship, and nothing else. The second woman was Catherine. Nothing was more typical of Potiomkin's passion for extremes than his permanent attachment to these two women, the strongest and the weakest, the proudest and the most humble of their sex, the Empress and the slave.

The Empress's shadow brooded over all that he did; this man, whose ambition, avarice, and thirst for power knew no bounds, never ceased to be her servant. Whatever he attempted was attempted for her sake. He could not endure that anyone should come between them, but he always acknowledged her as his superior, bowed to her will, and never forgot the respect which he owed her as a subject. His highest ambition remained always to earn her praise. Catherine knew this, and because of it she had no fear that Potiomkin, whose power was practically unlimited, might one day eclipse her as Menshikov had eclipsed the first Catherine, and Biron, Anna Ivanovna. She gave him an entirely free hand, particularly in the South, but it was always her own invisible hand that guided his. It was an inspired and creative hand, and whatever wonders it worked—whether they were permanent or merely illusory—were worked for Catherine.

The moment he extricated himself from Catherine's enfeebling embrace, Potiomkin's life became ruled by the "tremendous plan worthy of an Alexander or a Cæsar" which he had read in his mistress's eyes—that of crushing Turkey, taking Constantinople, driving the Mussulman out of Europe, ruling the Black Sea and from the Black Sea the whole of South-eastern Europe, and creating a new Greece under Russian rule. This plan had doubtless taken shape in Catherine's mind even before she secured the Russian

throne, but only Potiomkin had had the vision to grasp it. When he travelled to the South for the first time in 1774 as Governor of White Russia, the plan was firmly rooted in his mind. It was he who asked for a stronger garrison near the Turkish frontier, suggested Cherson as a suitable headquarters, decided that Otshakov, the Turkish border fortress, must be captured, and earmarked Sebastopol, hitherto a peaceful harbour town, as the future base for the Russian warships. Meanwhile in Petersburg, Panin, who was still prime minister, opposed these plans and by his opposition brought suspicion on himself; Catherine not only suspected that Frederick II was jealous, but that Panin was in league with him and the Grand Duke Paul. Backed by Potiomkin's support she overrode the wishes of her own ministers. In the summer of 1776 she sent a fleet of vessels, which were really camouflaged warships, to attempt a passage through the Dardanelles. It was an open challenge to Turkey and met with the success it had hoped for. After a sharp exchange of notes, the Porte, powerless to do otherwise, signed a new agreement whereby Russia was guaranteed a free passage for all her ships through the Dardanelles. It was a bloodless but an insufficient victory. What Catherine really wanted was war. A few weeks after the signing of the pact her second grandson was born; she gave him the name of Constantine, and so that the political significance of this christening should be perfectly clear, medals were struck showing the Sophia Church of Constantinople on one side and the Black Sea with a star rising over it on the other. The child Constantine was handed over to the care of a Greek nurse; at a banquet given by Potiomkin in honour of his birth Greek verses were recited, Greek youths were appointed to be the infant's playmates; in short, nothing was omitted which might leave the Porte and Europe in any doubt as to Catherine's plans for expansion.

One of Potiomkin's best friends at the Russian Court was the Austrian Ambassador, Count Cobenzl. Maria Theresa's health was failing, and her son, Joseph II, was no less

ambitious than Catherine. It was he who had forced his mother to swallow the choice morsel of "Polish cake," and he now showed himself quite ready to share in the partitioning of Turkey, an age-old enemy of the Hapsburgs. He was perfectly willing to concede the Crimea, the Archipelago, even Constantinople, to Catherine if he in turn were allowed to pocket Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. An understanding was reached by which Joseph, as Holy Roman Emperor, was appointed supreme head of the Western Church, and Catherine supreme head of the Eastern, and in this capacity the two leaders of Christendom met at Mohilev. Catherine went out of her way to fascinate the son of the sanctimonious Maria Theresa, and Joseph let it seem that her efforts were not wasted. He fell in with her light conversational tone. Catherine was never more charming and witty than when she meant to discuss matters of grave political importance. She liked to adopt a graceful, almost musical-comedy manner, to joke about a thousand inconsequent trifles and then toss the real question like a bubble lightly into the middle of the conversation. At Mohilev she asked casually whether the Pope would consent to hand over the keys of Rome to Joseph. The Emperor replied in the same bantering tone that he believed Catherine would achieve *her* Rome (meaning Constantinople) first. The result of this interview was a treaty—quite informal, because they were unable to agree as to the priority of the signatures—but nevertheless explicit; all that remained to be decided was the division of the spoils. This proved to be an insurmountable obstacle. Throughout 1782 and 1783, while all Europe was waiting for a declaration of war between the two allies and Turkey, Catherine and Joseph were exchanging acrimonious letters which threatened finally to lead to an open break. Only the tactful intervention of Count Kaunitz prevented the two hunters from tearing each other to pieces over the skin of the lion that was not yet slain. Even Catherine, who had been so near to the realization of her "tremendous plan," resigned herself to abandoning it temporarily; while she had been making Joseph her ally

against "the shameful encroachments of the Porte," she had quietly annexed the Crimea.

It was Catherine's idea, but Potiomkin had carried it out. By the treaty of Kutchuk-Kainardi, Crimea had been declared independent and Shangagarei nominated as Khan. It was the old story of Courland and Poland over again. The "independent" Khan was in actual fact a figurehead entirely dependent on Russia for protection against the insurrections stirred up in his country by Russian money. To save his own skin he finally agreed to hand over the Crimea to Catherine in return for an annual pension of a hundred thousand roubles. Potiomkin occupied the peninsula with his troops, crushed all opposition, and was given the title "Prince of Tauris." Deploring Joseph II's timidity Catherine wrote to him: "I am firmly decided to count on no one but to trust entirely to my own resources. Once the cake is baked all their mouths will begin to water."

It was Potiomkin's task to "bake the cake." He had unlimited authority, unlimited means at his disposal. He was not only governor of the newly annexed province, but Field Marshal and Inspector General of the entire Russian military forces. His business now was to turn the desert waste of Tauris into a civilized country and make it the base for renewed aggression against Turkey.

It was a task that appealed to his heart and his imagination. He loved the country which had been entrusted to him, he felt thoroughly at home there. As governor of White Russia he had always enjoyed talking to the chiefs of the Asiatic tribes, he had taken Kirgirs, Bashkirs, and Kalmuks into his service, had allowed them to wear their colourful national costumes—for the sheer delight he took in their picturesque appearance—and had even put them, costumes and all, into the National Guards, an unheard-of breach of tradition. He did far more to pacify the rebellious South by these methods than by the secret re-instatement of the political police. He invariably treated these alien tribes, who were forbidden under pain of heavy penalties to address petitions or complaints to

the government, on a footing of equality and friendliness. It was true that he accomplished his entry into the Crimea and the restoring of order with more brutality than any other General in his place would have used, for he was as careless of human life as he was of money, but once he had established himself and made contacts with the Tartar chiefs, they were able to sense a congeniality in him that was conspicuously lacking in other envoys from the Russian Court. He was an Asiatic, possibly by ancestry, most emphatically in his tastes and habits, and he entered this ancient and ruined kingdom of the Khans as its spiritual heir.

Only one thing more was needed to enable him to turn it into the fairyland of his dreams—the mere trifle of a century. But his imagination made up for what was lacking in time to accomplish all that had to be done. In a few months everything was planned in his head, and he really believed that his task was completed. He embarked on a hundred projects simultaneously—the fortification of Cherson, the building of the naval harbour at Sebastopol; he ordered a vast fleet of merchant vessels and warships to be built which were to occupy and dominate the Black Sea; he imported melon seeds and vegetables, silk-worms from China, mulberries from Italy, caused forests and vineyards to be planted, opened a dozen large new factories, built roads, increased the size and number of the infantry regiments, ordered fresh consignments of cannons for the artillery, and finally made plans for a new metropolis on the banks of the Dnieper which was to rival Petersburg in the North, and which he named Ekaterinoslav—“Catherine’s glory.” Before a single workman was engaged, or a single stone was laid, he founded the University of Ekatarinoslav; celebrated professors from all over the world were engaged to give lectures, and invitations were issued to prospective students both in Russia and abroad. Potiomkin himself made frequent journeys to Petersburg to inform Catherine of the wonders of this new city which was to spring up overnight like one in an Arabian Nights’ fairy-tale. A vision of its broad, sunny streets, its shady parks, its

music academy, military school, hospital and, most magnificent of all, the residence of the Governor Potiomkin floated before Catherine's eyes. She believed too in all the other miracles Potiomkin reported to her, the fields of waving corn, the lush meadows, the villages full of contented, prosperous peasants—she really believed that in three years Potiomkin had been able to create the happiest and most fruitful province of her empire out of a stretch of barren steppeland.

She decided to visit the new provinces; she wanted to see Potiomkin's miracles for herself, and show them to those evil-tongued gossips who had dared to question the genius of her matchless friend. She had discovered this man, had sent him from her arms to serve his country—now she was to have her reward in seeing all that he had accomplished for her glory. She combined several other plans with the journey; she meant to take her youngest grandson Constantine to the frontiers of his future kingdom, she meant to alarm and provoke the Turks by her close proximity. She asked Joseph II to meet her at Cherson, hoping that the sight of the "baked cake" would stimulate his flagging enthusiasm for their joint war on Islam. The prospect of the journey acted on her senses like new wine; no political scruples could hold her from it. She was fifty-eight, but her enterprise, her vitality, her enthusiasm, had never been more abundant. And apart from that, Potiomkin was impatiently awaiting her arrival.

Four years had not enabled him to make a garden out of the desert, forests out of steppeland, wealth where there had been squalor, but in the space of a few weeks he was able to create the illusion of all this for Catherine's delight. The streets, villages and market towns were only marked on maps, the factories, regiments, and cannons had their existence only on paper. The steppes were still as barren and desolate, the villages as tumbledown and dirty as they had always been, but that made no difference to Potiomkin. He was no wizard, but he was a magnificent stage manager, and the stage management of Catherine's Crimean journey was the greatest triumph of production that has ever been known. It was a unique

achievement worthy of being numbered, with the hanging gardens of Babylon, among the seven wonders of the world.

Catherine set out on her famous journey in February. An army of forty thousand men was entrusted with the safety of the royal retinue. Catherine's sledge was the size of a small house, it had three little windows in each wall and was drawn by eight horses. At every post station along the route five hundred fresh horses were waiting in readiness, and at short distances along the road huge bonfires were lit at night. In this way the journey to Kiev was accomplished within the short space of a fortnight.

Potiomkin had gone ahead to make the necessary "arrangements." The inhabitants of all the towns had been ordered to put a fresh coat of paint on their houses—most of them, it is true, painted only the walls that faced the street—in the villages groups of artificial trees had been arranged to screen unsightly spots, broken-down roofs had been repaired not with tiles but with cardboard painted in imitation of tiles, the population was instructed to wear its best clothes, the girls were told to comb their hair, wear flowers, and strew petals in the roadway, all the ancient, infirm, and unkempt members of the community had orders to remain within doors, begging or the presenting of petitions was strictly forbidden, and everyone was commanded to "express their happiness by smiles and merry gestures."

More than forty years before Catherine had travelled the same road, and on that occasion ragged, half-naked figures had clustered round her carriage; emaciated, hostile faces on which she read misery, hunger—and the truth. Her heart had been wrung and her mind spurred on to noble resolutions. Nothing had come of those fine resolutions; the peasants still suffered and starved as they had starved and suffered under Elizabeth—only this time Catherine was spared the spectacle of their misery. Potiomkin's masterly, artistic hand had drawn a veil before her eyes, and given the ageing Catherine the grateful illusion of having realized a false dream. She had not been able to give the peasants their independence, she

had not made free men out of slaves, but when she saw these clean and decent streets, these well-dressed villagers, this gay pageant of merrymaking, she believed that in spite of her failure she had given her subjects happiness and prosperity. "Is not my little household prettily furnished?" she asked the French Ambassador, Ségur. "Do you not find it well and agreeably run?"

She was in the highest of spirits when the party arrived at Kiev, where they remained for several weeks, for the journey was to be continued by boat and it was necessary to wait until the Dnieper thawed before they could proceed. The old town had made elaborate preparations for the reception of the royal travellers. All the palaces were thrown open, the shops were stocked with vast supplies of goods, trade boomed, and the common people had a fresh spectacle to gaze at every day in the week. Deputations from the Southern provinces, members of the Polish nobility, French generals, and, as *avant-courier* of Joseph II, the witty Prince de Ligne, all came to pay their respects to the Empress of Russia. They were Catherine's guests for the duration of their stay, and each visitor was provided with a furnished house, and a retinue of cooks, servants, and carriages. Fresh table linen was used for every meal, and the soiled linen given away to the poor. Catherine was a perfect hostess, eager to please each one of her guests, anxious to charm and amuse them all. She swept aside Court etiquette, forbade politics to be mentioned, and in an access of good fellowship decided that they should all call each other by the familiar personal pronoun: "You shall all say 'du'! I wish that the whole of Europe might address me thus!" It was a somewhat difficult condition to fulfil, indeed Prince de Ligne was the only courtier who could bring himself to utter a "*Ta Majesté*" in addressing Catherine. The rule that politics were not to be discussed was even less strictly observed. In the mornings they all met at the house of the Austrian Ambassador, Count Cobenzl, which became known as a kind of "European café," and it is doubtful whether any other European café of the day was the scene of

more furious political argument. Even Catherine broke her own rule when it came to the point of expressing her hatred for the Turks. "What would your king say," she asked Ségur, "if he had a neighbour who killed twenty thousand of his subjects each year, sent pestilence and rebellion across the borders—what would he say if I supported such a neighbour in the way that he supports Turkey?"

But these were departures from the rule. Catherine's mind was versatile, and her conversation ranged over every subject under the sun. She discussed literature and writers, philosophy and philosophers, and while her corpulent, clumsy body moved with difficulty from room to room of the palace, her brain darted with its old swiftness from one topic to another—agriculture, child education, town planning, architecture. Verse-making and story-telling were favourite amusements, and in the evenings there were banquets and balls, but Catherine herself usually preferred the card-tables. She would retire to her bedroom at about ten o'clock; beside her bed was a wall of looking-glass which slid back at the touch of a secret button and revealed a second bed, that of her favourite Mamonov. It was one of Potiomkin's many little attentions, and wherever Catherine stayed throughout her Crimean journey she found the same contrivance installed in her bedroom.

Potiomkin himself, the real hero and instigator of the Crimean trip, lived in an ancient monastery. He enjoyed the society of monks and would talk to them for hours while the hectic festivities he had arranged were in progress. He took a special delight in showing his contempt for those gentlemen who intrigued behind his back and grovelled before his face. When he condescended to receive them they found him with a bearskin flung over his naked body, his bare feet in slippers, so engrossed in a game of chess that he seemed not to notice their entrance. Only the tactful Ségur discovered the right way of dealing with this wilful tyrant—he would seize him by the ears and kiss him on both cheeks.

At last May came and the Dneiper thawed, and as soon as the dangerous floating ice had been removed the company was

able to embark on the waiting boats. Here the real journey through Potiomkin's fairyland began. It was like a dream—the waking dream of some magician who had discovered the secret of materializing his visions. Seven floating palaces followed by eighty attendant vessels carried a total of three thousand people. The Empress's galley and those of her guests were lined with costly brocade, the walls gleamed with gold, there was gold on the servants' uniforms, the meals were served on plate of solid gold. An army of little boats darted among the vessels transporting visitors from one to another, conveying wine, food, and bands of musicians who played at the numerous dinners, balls, and concerts which were arranged to amuse this floating city of high-spirited travellers. By day the Empress would lie on the deck of her galley covered with a silken carpet to protect her from the sun. On the river banks that glided past she saw villages and towns decorated with huge triumphal arches and garlands, she saw cattle grazing in the pastures, troops manœuvring in the fields, and when dusk fell peasant men and girls in their gay, fluttering costumes dancing with care-free abandon. Nature herself seemed to be in league with this master illusionist, providing the most exquisite light effects for his daring spectacle, gilding his blatant back-cloths and properties with purest May sunshine. Even Potiomkin's severest critics grew silent before these never-ending wonders, and Catherine's rapture knew no bounds. She and her companions had left the world of reality behind, they were floating blissfully through a dream of restored antiquity, they called the Dneiper by its ancient name of Borysthenes, the land through which they passed was Tauris, their talk was of Iphigenia and the ancient gods, and Catherine felt that she was both Alexander and Cleopatra.

She did not know that this pleasant fairyland vanished the moment her boat had passed, that the houses behind the great triumphal arches were without roofs, doors, or windows, that behind the houses there were no streets, that the villages were deserted and the herds of cattle had been brought from long

distances to graze before her eyes, that the dancing men and girls were wretched serfs hastily collected at Potiomkin's orders, bundled into their costumes, and taught, not without considerable pains and a few sound beatings, to perform their care-free capers. As soon as the sun set they were packed into carts, as if they were some travelling theatrical company, and hurried over uneven streets and burning steppes to the next stand, where they would once again provide the Empress with a spectacle of holiday merrymaking.

The boats cast anchor three times, at Kanief, Kermanchug and Kadak. In each town there was a magnificent, newly erected palace with artificial waterfalls and a large shady park ready for the Empress's reception. Potiomkin could work miracles; he turned a primeval jungle into a formal English garden, elsewhere he transplanted trees that flourished for a few days in the sandy soil and then slowly withered. Wooden houses for the occupation of Catherine's guests had been hastily erected in the vicinity of the royal palaces; they were fly-blown structures but their rooms were furnished with every conceivable luxury. And wherever the eye roamed there were soldiers, fine, upstanding specimens of manhood magnificently equipped, in magnificent new uniforms.

At Ekaterinoslav the Empress met Joseph II on a charming hillside, and together they laid the foundation stone of the new cathedral. The plans for the cathedral had already been completed; they were on so tremendous a scale they made the Church of St. Peter in Rome appear like a village chapel. Joseph, being newly arrived in the Crimea was still immune to Potiomkin's hypnotic spell. He wrote to General Laszy: "I performed a great deed to-day. The Empress laid the first stone of a new church, and I laid—the last." He was right. The Cathedral of Ekaterinoslav was never built. But before long even the shrewd Joseph's doubts were laid aside. The party proceeded by carriage to Cherson. They drove through villages buzzing with industry, bricklaying, roof-making, road building, past markets stocked with merchandise; wherever they went they saw activity, pulsing life, busy crowds

and could not guess that these same villages were dead and derelict, that Potiomkin had snatched no less than twenty communities bodily from their homes in order temporarily to populate his provinces.

In Cherson there was less need for pretence. The visit of the two monarchs had drawn a large number of sightseers to the town; a horde of merchants, Armenians, Jews, and Tartars, had flocked to the city to offer their wares and capture profitable trade. During those days Cherson was a really crowded city, and offered the visitors a variety of impressive sights: the arsenals packed with cannons, and a fleet of brand new ships lying at anchor in the harbour, three of which were formally launched in Catherine's presence. Catherine and her distinguished guests were taken on an excursion to the interior and suddenly found themselves confronted with a signpost bearing the simple inscription: "This is the road to Byzantium."

On the opposite bank of the Dneiper the Noga steppes stretched bleakly towards the horizon, but even here a skilful hand had managed to produce some pleasing effects. Miniature towns of huge, gaily-coloured tents hung and carpeted with costly rugs had been pitched for the reception of the royal visitors. Endless caravans of heavily-laden camels wound past giving the impression of a brisk if somewhat primitive flow of trade between the Russian motherland and the newly-conquered provinces, and three thousand Don Cossacks galloped busily to and fro on their small, swift steeds. The further they penetrated into the interior, the remoter Europe and its day became, while the magic of this bizarre, oriental, and ageless world grew more potent with every step. At the frontiers of Tauris the Empress was greeted by a delegation of Myrzas; Caucasian princes, beautiful as the dreams of Greek sculptors, rode to meet her armed with bows and arrows; Circassian troops in silver robes riding bareback on milk-white horses bore down upon her like a white dazzling cloud. At last the slim minarets of Bashtasari rose on the horizon, and a few hours later they were in the ancient Arabian capital surrounded by men in

long, gold-embroidered robes and closely-veiled women. They were led to the Caliph's palace where cool fountains played in marble recesses, and here Catherine mounted the throne of the great Khan. The pampered travellers were provided with all their usual comforts, but Potiomkin had been careful not to mar the atmosphere of their surroundings; he had scrupulously refrained from violating the Asiatic character of the palace with fashionable French innovations. All through the night an artificial volcano spouted flames into the air illuminating the still beauty of the Moorish gardens.

Potiomkin was in his element here. He had left the rough Muscovite side of his character together with his bearskin and slippers at Kiev, he was now a mixture of extravagant, hospitable Sheikh and devoted vassal of his Empress. The ambitious planner of world-projects reverted to his old habit of jesting which had first attracted Catherine. "We often thought we should die of laughing, the Count was so merry," Prince de Ligne wrote, only in the next breath to be lost in admiration of Potiomkin's profound philosophical mind. This Russian fascinated him almost more than Catherine, by reason of his violently mingled character. Who, indeed, could reconcile his amazing activity with his notorious indolence, his boundless ambition with his general attitude of *laissez-faire*, his humour with the deep melancholy that was so characteristic of him? "He is colossal, like Russia," De Ligne wrote; "he has both desert wastes and gold mines. He looks idle, yet he works unceasingly, he is always lying on his couch yet never sleeps, he craves amusement and is sad in the midst of his pleasures, he is a sublime politician yet unreliable and capricious as a child. . . ." Like De Ligne, the infinitely more sceptical Ségur recognized Potiomkin as one of "the strangest and most spectacular figures of the century."

Potiomkin finally got his party of three thousand sightseers as far as Sebastopol, providing every kind of entertainment and amusement to shorten the journey, and being mindful to parade a constant stream of well-equipped soldiers before

their eyes. They arrived towards evening, and at the reception dinner which was served to eighty guests and at which a band of a hundred and eighty musicians played, Catherine broached the subject of her Turkish plans to Joseph openly for the first time. She was like a woman in a high fever, she brushed aside his objections, and declared that she could settle the Turks even without his help. "A hundred thousand men," Potiomkin said, "are waiting for me to give the signal." As he spoke all the windows of the room flew open and Catherine's feverish gaze travelled over the massed backs of Tartar regiments to the wide sweep of the bay where the new Black Sea fleet, built in two years, lay at anchor. A roar of cannon broke simultaneously from the decks, together with a shout of "Long live the Empress of Pontus Euxinus!" That same night they rode out to inspect the largest of the ships and the newly-built town with its barracks, arsenals, hospitals, and government buildings, and before he went to bed Joseph wrote to General Laszy: "If I were as close to Berlin, and if the Prussians were as stupid as the Turks—I hardly think I should be able to resist the temptation of destroying them."

It was an effective spectacle, and a few days later it was followed by another which formed the triumphant climax of the journey; at Poltava two armies met in a mock combat staged to represent the famous victory which Peter the Great had won on that same ground. The spectators were caught by the heroic glamour of the scene, a thirst for glory, war and conquest filled their veins, a drunken conviction of victory swept them all into a fever of high excitement. Joseph signed the Secret Treaty over which he had hesitated so long; already he saw Belgrade restored to his possession and the Danube flowing through Austrian territory as far as Wallachia. But he was still a little uneasy, a little frightened of his new ally. Like the even more cautious Ségur, he recognized in Catherine the mightiest, the richest, the most independent of world powers—the sovereign monarch of Europe.

More than a man, more than all men, more than all the kings of the earth! It was the second zenith of her life. A quarter of a century had gone by since she had ascended the throne of Russia, hailed by the joyful acclamation of the people. Everything had turned out differently from her hopes, but she accepted the existing order and found it good. She had accomplished little of what she had set out to do, but she had achieved other and greater triumphs instead. She had not been able to give the serf the strip of land he cultivated with such bitter toil, but she had expanded the frontiers and enhanced the glory of her great and glorious Russia. Fate had frowned on her schemes for social reform, but her lucky star had watched with fanatical persistency over her more ambitious projects. The beliefs which she had made for herself or had learned, as an intelligent woman, from others, had been forgotten or deliberately rejected with the passing years, but her essential and primitive instincts, the stuff of which those half-conscious dreams of her repressed childhood had been woven, survived, took substance and shape, and stamped her reign with the living imprint of her personality, the imprint of an insatiable conqueror.

Her happiness for the moment was complete, and she owed it to Potiomkin. It might have been better for the future if she had discovered the flaws in his administration and the hidden imperfections of his achievements—if she had known that the fortress of Cherson was built of sand, and far from being able to withstand a single cannon shot was to be severely damaged by the first thunderstorm that broke over it; if she had known that the warships were all constructed of the poorest materials and had been prematurely launched, that the cannons in the arsenals were without ammunition or transport carriages, that the maintenance of the hundred thousand soldiers existed only in Potiomkin's imagination and on the bills for their equipment and supplies, and that the Tartars who paid her such respectful homage were secretly in league with the Turks. Such knowledge might not only have cooled her war fever, and modified her attitude toward the

Turks, but damped her enthusiasm for Potiomkin and all his works. Rumiantzov, Repnin, Sievers, the generals, diplomats, and state officials, in short all those who were Potiomkin's enemies and experienced men of the world, were justified in regarding this Crimean journey in a sober and pessimistic light. It had cost seven million roubles and an enormous expenditure of human energy, without achieving anything of lasting value; its only purpose and result was to blind the Empress to the fact that the far vaster sums which Potiomkin had spent on colonizing the South and reorganizing the army had been uselessly squandered. In a word, nothing had been achieved save the further aggrandizement of Potiomkin in Catherine's eyes.

That, at any rate, had been successful. The Crimean journey was not only a landmark in her life, it marked the climax of her relationship with Potiomkin. Though she went to bed with the handsome Mamonov every night, and though Potiomkin had fallen in love with a succession of women in the intervals of devoting himself to his gentle niece Branicka, their two souls remained united in a never-ending ecstasy. If Potiomkin had been merely ambitious he would long since have attempted to establish himself as independent ruler of the South; this was a very feasible plan which had been suggested to him more than once, and was suspected by many of his enemies as being his secret design. He never tried to do this, he did not even want it, his ambition was inseparable from his love, and the sole object of both remained always to be Catherine's "right-hand man." Seen in this light, anti-social as it may be, the Crimean journey and the elaborate improvisation of a happy, prosperous, and secure country, were no more than a highly original and expensive tribute paid by one of the greatest lovers of history to his mistress.

The dream of Potiomkin and Catherine was realized prematurely: the French, better informed than the Empress of Russia, urged the Porte into immediate and defensive action, and war broke out before Potiomkin was ready for it. All the glaring

deficiencies in his preparation now became apparent—there were not enough soldiers, not enough food for the soldiers, no roads for the transportation of food, no wood for building bridges, no powder for the cannons, no cloth for uniforms, and above all no money.

“If the ‘Turks are victorious,” a contemporary journalist wrote, “they will never dream of invading Moscow or Petersburg. But the Russians have only to gain a couple of victories to march on Constantinople.” Two victories—this meant that the fortress of Otchakov must be captured and the Turkish capital invaded by sea; then the Russian and Austrian armies would be able to converge.

Prince de Ligne, though employed in the service of Austria, had begged to be allowed to fight on the side of the Russians, and he hurried to the front fearing he might arrive too late to take part in the storming of Otchakov. He was sadly disillusioned when he reached the Russian headquarters at Jassy. Otchakov was still standing, and nobody seemed to have the slightest intention of attacking it. Where was the giant, the wizard, the firebrand of the Crimea? Surrounded by seven hundred servants, half a dozen mistresses, watched over by the devoted Branicka, Potiomkin, a downcast and discouraged man, was idling away the time with empty pleasures that only bored him. Even the Prince de Ligne bored him. What could he do when they had no timber and there were no trees in this benighted province to provide timber? He had ordered wood to be sent from his forests in Poland, and gunpowder from Holland—that was all. They could do nothing but wait as patiently as possible, and let the enemy wait too. When De Ligne became more than usually tiresome Potiomkin would arrange for a breathless messenger to arrive with news of a fictitious victory somewhere in the Urals. For the rest he occupied himself with women, cards and drink.

Eventually the wood from Poland and the gunpowder from Holland arrived. But still Potiomkin hung back. He was not greatly concerned with Otchakov—Otchakov was merely a

step in the great campaign of victory he had promised Catherine. Meanwhile the weeks went by and De Ligne received urgent despatches from Joseph who was delaying the attack on Belgrade until such time as the Turks should be diverted by the Russian offensive. "What of Otchakov?" Joseph asked the Prince, and the Prince in turn demanded of Potiomkin. In the summer it had been reckoned that a week at the most would be needed to capture the old Moorish fortress. "What of Otchakov?" Catherine asked in every letter. Potiomkin avoided De Ligne, and left Catherine's letters unanswered.

"Being so long without news of you, I die a thousand deaths," she wrote to him. "I receive news each week from every province of the kingdom save only the one which occupies all my thoughts and hopes. For God's sake and for mine, take care of yourself! Nothing makes me more wretched than the fear that you may be ill. . . ."

Catherine's anxiety was well grounded. Potiomkin's health was steadily failing. The strain of his irregular life and his repeated gastronomic orgies had undermined his vigorous constitution. Yet it was not that which paralysed him—but fear. He feared defeat; he had climbed too quickly to endure the thought of it. He was like a mountaineer who, seized with dizziness before scaling the final peak, clings to the nearest rock and is unable to move either forward or back. Also he feared death. He had none of Orlov's cold-blooded courage; like all imaginative men his attitude towards death was a very complex one. He was deeply religious. He always wore a medal of the Virgin round his neck under his tunic, and his bedroom was filled with holy pictures before which he prayed night and morning. He had lived sinfully, and continued to do so, but he had never ceased to hope that a few years would remain to him when, in the seclusion of some monastery, he would be able to find grace and the road to salvation. He did not want to die in battle.

The first real setback, finding him in this state of depression, was bound to crush him completely. The new Black Sea fleet, the dearest child of his creation, was severely

damaged by a storm while sailing out of the harbour of Narva. Potiomkin promptly not only abandoned his dream of conquering Byzantium but wrote to Catherine that they would be forced to evacuate the Crimea which, being in a state of perpetual rebellion, demanded the continual presence of troops.

"Your letter no doubt was written in a moment of agitation," she replied, "when you believed the whole Fleet to have been destroyed. The storm surely injured others besides ourselves. Where shall we dispose the remainder of the Fleet if we evacuate Sebastopol? And how shall we voluntarily relinquish the great advantage we have won in war and peace? For heaven's sake, think no more of this. A man who sits a horse does not climb down in order to cling to the animal's tail! Abandon this harmful policy of defence and proceed against Otchakov. . ."

Otchakov, always Otchakov! Potiomkin was less capable than ever of resolute action. He longed more and more for peace and quiet, for a chance of throwing off his responsibilities. He begged Catherine to relieve him of his command and allow him to retire to a monastery. He saw inevitable defeat looming ahead, and flight to a monastery as the only way of escape left to him.

Catherine, however, was made of different and sterner stuff. She had allowed herself the luxury of optimism in the good days; like Potiomkin she had indulged in rosy and intoxicating dreams, but when she was threatened with defeat she did not flinch. Her faith in her star and in Potiomkin were unshakable. "Do not rob me and the country of our most indispensable, capable, and faithful subject," she begged him, "and remember that a courageous mind can overcome temporary misfortune. You are my friend, my dearest pupil, you often give me better counsel than I can myself provide. But you are as impatient as a five-year-old child, while the business entrusted to you demands patience, infinite and unshakable patience. . . ." "Do not think," she wrote again, "that any power in the world can lessen my confidence in you," and ended with the words: "There are no tender endearments I do not say to you."

She might have written with greater elegance, wisdom, and even truth, but her love was capable of infinite transmutation. A year ago Potiomkin had been a supreme god to whom she gazed up in awe; now that this god had collapsed she showed no trace of disappointment, she simply became a tender mother comforting and encouraging her troubled and despondent child. God alone knew what courage she herself needed at this time. The Prince de Ligne had rightly named her "the Imperturbable." Catastrophe was following so rapidly upon catastrophe that a final disaster seemed inevitable.

Soon after the outbreak of the Turkish war the old enmity with Sweden threatened to blaze up afresh. Gustav III sent a fleet to cross the Baltic. "If you were here," Catherine wrote to Potiomkin, "it would not take me five minutes to decide whether to endure such a demonstration." She decided finally to endure it because the Black Sea Fleet was out of action and she was planning to move the Baltic Fleet south. This called forth a united protest from France and England. Catherine negotiated with both powers, promised France concessions in Egypt, and England concessions in the Archipelago, but while she was biting back her anger at these hypocritical Christians who refused to support her in her war on Islam, she suddenly found that her efforts had been wasted: Gustav invaded her frontiers without waiting to make a declaration of war, the Baltic Fleet could not be moved, and all Catherine's resources were needed to defend her capital against the advancing Swedes. Even the pampered Regiment of Guards was called into action. The nobles sent battalions of hastily equipped, hastily trained peasants, and aged Generals were dragged from retirement and put in command of the troops. "Amid the roar of cannons which shakes her windows, your Imperturbable writes to you," Catherine began her letter to the Prince de Ligne.

The situation was bad, and it grew worse as the months went by. Joseph's army suffered a crushing defeat, he himself narrowly escaped with his life, and the Turks poured into the

newly colonized and prosperous provinces. "The disgrace can only be felt, not described," said Joseph. Prussia was preparing to swoop down on the Austrians, it seemed as if the whole of Europe was bent on forming a coalition against "the most sovereign Empress."

"Take Otchakov," Catherine wrote to Potiomkin in November 1788, "and make peace with the Turks. Then you will see how they all shrivel up like snow in a thaw."

Catherine's exhortations were an enormous psychological relief to Potiomkin. The task of having to become a second Alexander and conquer the whole East was miraculously lifted from him. Now there was really no more than Otchakov at stake. Potiomkin's inertia fell from him like a cloak, and after more than a year of lazy siege he captured Otchakov in a few days. When a man who knows the fear of death has been able to shake off that fear he becomes a thousand times more vigorous than one to whom courage is a matter of course. Potiomkin spared neither friend nor foe in the attack, he himself moved in the thick of the fighting, he stormed the enemy ramparts with an inadequate artillery, twenty thousand Russians lost their lives in the charge and the survivors, half-crazed with victory and the terrible strain of the battle, avenged themselves with merciless ferocity on the vanquished city. But it was a victory, a victory at last!

"I take you by both ears and kiss you in my thoughts, Grishenka, dear friend of my bosom!" Catherine wrote.

The taking of Otchakov was not only a tactical victory but a great moral victory as well. Potiomkin's despair vanished as if by magic. Instead of resigning his generalship to Rumiantzov he took over the troops which had been under that General's command and captured the strongly fortified town of Bender. From that moment the tide began to turn on all the fighting fronts. The Swedish nobility, deprived of their rights by Gustav and bribed by Catherine, revolted against their king, old Admiral Greigh defeated the Swedish Fleet, the Austrian General Laudon took the stronghold of Belgrade, and together with General Suvarov—the greatest

Russian military genius of that age—won the decisive victory of Fockshany. But as far as Catherine was concerned Potiomkin remained the hero of the day. All her letters abroad were filled with his praises. Incidentally her prophecy had been fulfilled: her victory had silenced the European powers. She could once more mock at the Prussian king to her heart's content when she referred to him in her letters to Potiomkin as that "fat Gu" (Frederick had died in 1786 and had been succeeded by Frederick William). After the peace with Sweden was signed in August 1790 and the *status quo* restored, she wrote: "We have been fortunate enough to draw one foot out of the mud. If we succeed in dragging out the other, we may cry Hallelujah."

But though the tone of these letters was still as tender as ever, they had begun to annoy Potiomkin. Instead of the customary footnote: "Sashenka sends his love," Catherine now wrote: "The little black boy sends his love." A new favourite had been installed in Petersburg, a trifling and unremarkable enough occurrence in itself, only Sashenka had been Mamonov, Potiomkin's protégé and devoted slave, whereas "the little black boy" was a twenty-two-year-old officer of the Guards, Plato Zubov, who hardly knew Potiomkin, though he was well known to Potiomkin as a protégé of his old enemy, Peter Saltykov. Young Zubov had been lucky, but he was also determined to carve out a career for himself; like everybody else at Court, with the exception of Catherine herself, he had known of Mamonov's unfaithfulness for a year past and had waited for the day when the Empress should discover that she had been deceived. He had repeatedly told Catherine's lady-in-waiting, the famous Pierkushina, of his passion for her mistress, and his influential protectors saw to it that he moved freely at Court, so that when Catherine found herself forced to dismiss Mamonov, Zubov was waiting on the spot. She never dreamed that Potiomkin would be annoyed by her choice of a new lover. "I returned to life like a fly that has been frozen by the

cold," she confessed to her absent friend, and described the fascinating personality and charms of her new favourite with that shameless sentimental intimacy which was customary between them. When she realized from the tone of his replies that Potiomkin did not share her own enthusiasm, she tried by every means in her power to reconcile him to her new favourite. "The child thinks that you are infinitely more intelligent, amusing and charming than all your friends put together." But Potiomkin was not at all impressed by this tribute from a young, unknown upstart. Without warning, in the winter of 1791, he abandoned the war, his generals, and his mistresses, and hurried to Petersburg.

His arrival was a surprise to Catherine, but obviously a joyful one. She welcomed him as a victor and a hero, and seemed to have forgotten that it was he who had provoked this war which so far had brought Russia no greater glory than that of having managed not to be disgracefully beaten. Catherine showered him with decorations and gifts, gold dinner services and diamonds, but when he begged her "to extract the painful tooth" (a pun on the word Zubov which in Russian means "tooth") he met with his first refusal. For the first time in the history of their relationship Catherine refused to sacrifice a favourite at his wish. He inveighed against Zubov with a subtle cunning and eloquence born of jealousy, gave the soundest reasons for his dismissal, exposed all his faults, his pettiness, his absurdity, but nothing he could say was able to injure this insignificant youth in Catherine's eyes. For Zubov was making her happy—happier than any other lover had been able to make her.

"The little black boy" had timed his appearance well. He came at the moment when Mamonov had taught Catherine the ungallant "lesson" that even an Empress cannot remain eternally young, that in spite of her unique and divine nature, Catherine herself was growing old, that her body, which still knew the hot, unslaked ardours of youth, was not immune from the exterior processes of decay. Plato Zubov had succeeded in making her forget this timely but extremely un-

welcome lesson. He had been submitted to the same humiliating apprenticeship as his predecessors, passing first through the doctor's hands then through those of Mademoiselle Protassov, and the Empress had resolved more firmly than ever not to involve her sorely wounded heart in this new affair—but the truth is that unhappiness instead of hardening the human heart only renders it more susceptible to human kindness. Her self-control was so enormous that it is impossible to tell how deeply Mamonov had wounded her woman's pride, we can only guess that from her infinite gratitude to the man who restored her damaged self-respect: greater even than her gratitude to Potiomkin for his twenty years of friendship, greater than her gratitude for all he had done and even for all that she believed he had done for her.

With the unerring instinct of a man whose vital nerve is threatened, Potiomkin felt that Zubov was not only claiming more of Catherine's attention than any of her previous lovers, but that he was encroaching upon those secret places of her soul which so far had been reserved for him alone. He dared not deliver an ultimatum as he had done in the case of the "white nigger," Yermolov. He knew that he would lose. Their friends, even the foreign diplomats, wrongly believed that Catherine had sacrificed her lovers because she feared Potiomkin's power, which was almost as great as her own. Yet his power at this moment was greater than it had ever been. Catherine did not fear his power, she had never feared it. For twenty years she had loved Potiomkin above all other men, now she loved another more than she loved him.

It never occurred to Potiomkin to use his power against the Empress. He attempted something far madder, more foolhardy, and more hopeless—he tried to recapture her love. He declared open war on Zubov, a battle for the love of an old woman. Potiomkin was fifty, he had never been handsome, but he was still a vigorous giant with a face illumined by intelligence and fire. Zubov had the advantage of youth, he was slender rather than tall, with the quick grace of a cat, and his most beautiful feature was his silky brown hair. He

was in no way a match for Potiomkin, before whose powerful personality his own paled like a candle flame in strong sunlight. But to Catherine every word that fell from his soft, womanly mouth was a miracle of intelligence and wit, and her love lent him all the strength he needed to wage this unequal battle.

Potiomkin never complained, though he suffered a great deal. "He glows in the splendour of his victory," Catherine wrote to Grimm, "bright as the day, he is as merry as a chaffinch, as brilliant as a constellation of stars, and wittier than ever." His Taurian palace, which in its voluptuous oriental magnificence far outshone the formal splendour of the royal palaces, was given over to entertainments on a scale such as even he had never attempted before, such as no one had ever attempted. Balls, masquerades, comedies, firework displays of unrivalled magnificence followed each other thick and fast, and all this extravagance was centred on Catherine, a woman of sixty-one, with swollen legs and toothless gums, who was courted, extolled, and worshipped as a goddess. Potiomkin wore a coat, that cost half a million roubles, studded with diamonds from neck to hem, but his epigrams were more dazzling than his diamonds, his wit sparkled more brightly than the fireworks. He invoked all that he was, everything he possessed, or had accomplished, all their burning memories and dreams, in a final overpowering attempt to rekindle in the eyes of his beloved Catherine that spark without which all his possessions and all his power meant nothing to him.

He failed. The aged Catherine had lost all sense of values, she was the slave of her sagging but still desirous flesh. Erotically Potiomkin had never meant very much to her, but eroticism as an end in itself had never meant more to her than it did now that she was old and clung with a thousand frantic tentacles to youth and its still remembered joys. In the past she had ruled her lovers and her own passion for them; now, when the time had come for her to be sensible and resolute in this Titanic struggle with her senses, Catherine,

knowing that it would be her last fight, allowed herself to be ruled by a lover, by a man who boasted no other qualities but that of being a good lover. She asked Potiomkin one day before a room full of guests the price of one of his castles. Potiomkin, guessing for whom she intended to buy it, replied that unfortunately it was already sold. "Since when?" Catherine demanded. "Since this morning," he replied. "And to whom did you sell it?" Potiomkin pointed to his adjutant, a penniless gentleman, who, by the lifting of a finger suddenly became the possessor of a magnificent castle and twelve thousand serfs. Potiomkin was as munificent in his jealousy as in everything else. But Zubov was uncomfortably aware of this jealousy. He knew that Potiomkin was trying to destroy him, and, confident of his power over Catherine, he decided to strike back. He demanded Potiomkin's removal from Petersburg.

At the end of a particularly spectacular banquet at which Diershavin's triumphal hymn, *Rejoice in Thy Victory, Happy Russia*, was sung for the first time before an audience of three thousand guests, Potiomkin escorted the Empress to her carriage. It was two o'clock in the morning. Potiomkin was dressed in scarlet, wearing all his medals, and to protect himself from the night air he had thrown a black cloak over his shoulders. When he had kissed Catherine's hand he remained standing, a lonely and disconsolate giant on the steps of his brilliantly lighted palace, watching the back of the Empress's carriage with his one eye until it was lost in the darkness. The next morning he received a note from Catherine thanking him for the magnificent entertainment which, she added, she had been pleased to consider as a farewell feast, since his presence must be far more urgently needed at the front than in Petersburg.

Potiomkin had lost. He had contracted debts of more than a million roubles to pay for these lavish entertainments, and during his absence the aged General Repnin had beaten the Turks. The war was over, everything was over. Without seeing Catherine again, Potiomkin returned to Jassy to be

present at the signing of the peace treaty. Never had a less peacefully inclined man sat at a peace congress. Boiling with rage and miserable defiance he went out of his way to quibble over trifling formalities until it seemed that he must provoke the Turkish diplomats into a renewed declaration of hostilities. But he was a marked man. The most famous physicians in Petersburg had prescribed a rigorous diet for him, yet Potiomkin, who had always been terrified of death, now seemed to court it. He ordered a tremendous meal, composed not of the delicate, carefully-prepared dishes he had enjoyed in his happier days, but a regular Cossack repast of salt pork and raw beets, both of which the doctors had strictly forbidden. He washed it down with several litres of Russian *kvass*, then flung himself into his kibita, and with the faithful little Branicka at his side drove, for some inexplicable reason, to Otchakov, the town which he had besieged for over a year and finally, at Catherine's orders, captured. But he never reached it. He was taken suddenly ill on the journey, the carriage was stopped, coats were flung hastily on the ground, and there, stretched on a wretched country road, without doctors or priests, Russia's greatest man breathed his last. Branicka gently closed his eyes.

Catherine fainted three times when she heard the news of his death, and had to be bled. "How shall I replace such a man?" she wrote to Grimm. "His most beautiful characteristic was to me the greatness of his heart, his mind, and his soul. Because of that we were always able to understand one another and ignore those who could not do so."

Zubov was one of those who could not understand. He had always been jealous of Potiomkin and he remained so even after his hated rival's death. He was determined to be everything to Catherine that Potiomkin had been, she must give him all that she had given Potiomkin, she must never so much as think of the dead man or even allow his memory to live in the minds of others. She set aside a hundred thousand roubles for a mausoleum to be built at Cherson, where the bones of the city's founder were to be laid at rest.

But Zubov could not endure the thought that his dead rival should be so honoured, and the helplessly enslaved Catherine gave in to him. A modest tombstone was finally erected, not by the Empress, to whom Potiomkin had dedicated himself in lifelong love and friendship, for whom he had laboured and dreamed, fought wars and built cities, and with whose name his own was to be linked in immortality, but by his humble little niece Branicka.

Yet the restlessness which had consumed his whole life followed Potiomkin's corpse to the grave. Paul, on his accession to the throne, had the remains of this man who had despised him and whom he had hated, disinterred and flung into the town-moat of Petersburg "so that no trace might remain of him." Perhaps they mouldered there; no one can say for certain whether the nameless bones which Catherine's beloved grandson Alexander caused to be laid to final rest in the Nevsky Cloister were the earthly remains of the man whose memory, good or evil according to one's estimation of him, remains immortal.

## CHAPTER XIII

### DEATH THE INVINCIBLE

WHEN she was sixty, Catherine wrote an inscription for her own gravestone:

Here lies

Catherine the Second.

In the year 1744 she came to Russia to marry Peter III.

At the age of fourteen she made the threefold resolution to please her husband, Elizabeth, and the Nation.

She neglected nothing in order to accomplish this.

Eighteen years of utter boredom and loneliness led her to read many books.

When she ascended the throne of Russia, she endeavoured to bring happiness, freedom, and prosperity to her subjects.

She forgave easily and hated no one.

She was considerate, easy-going, of a cheerful disposition, having genuine republican sentiments, and a kind heart.

She had many friends.

Work was a pleasure to her. She loved sociability and the arts.

This modest epitaph can hardly have been intended as a serious legacy to posterity. It was an essay in self-contemplation rather than a triumph of self-revelation. Catherine's estimate of herself was indulgent, and unduly modest. She seems to have ignored both her notorious sins and her exceptional talents.

The most striking phrase in this unvarnished self-portrait is her claim to "genuine republican sentiments." Catherine could not guess that a year after she had penned those lines she was to be taken at her word and that she would break it.

Her liberal ideas were incompatible with her autocratic

methods of government. Diderot had been annoyed by this inconsistency and had dared to reproach her with it after his visit to Petersburg. She replied to him:

You philosophers are fortunate people. You write on patient paper—I, poor Empress, am forced to write upon the ticklish skin of human beings.

This was during the Pugachev rebellion, when Catherine had made some unfortunate discoveries concerning the sensitiveness of the human skin. In plainer language, she had become convinced that any sudden reform made for the benefit of the lower classes of her people could only result in inevitable chaos and do more harm than good. Her republican ideals belonged to a distant future which she believed she would never see. She entrusted the education of her grandson Alexander to a confirmed Republican; she herself remained content to think that "she had never abused her unlimited power."

She was, and remained, a true democrat only within the confines of her palace. She was the mildest, kindest, most amiable of chatelaines. Except at official receptions, which she continued to detest whole-heartedly all her life, there was a rule that no one ever rose when she entered a room, and that her guests remained seated even when she addressed them directly and remained standing herself. Her partners at the evening game of whist had sometimes been known to fling their cards at her feet, with no worse result than causing the Empress to call loudly on the onlookers to testify that she had played fairly. Her warm and gracious charm was not reserved for her friends and guests alone, it extended even to the meanest of her servants. Elizabeth had boxed the ears of her waiting women—but then the humblest estate owner's wife in Russia treated her servants no better when she was in a rage. It was only Catherine who worded her most trifling request politely—"Would you be so good as to hand me my snuff-box?" There are a hundred charming anecdotes which illustrate Catherine's habit of treating her servants as human

beings: how she once rang repeatedly because she had an urgent letter to despatch and, receiving no answer, went into the ante-room, where she found the lackeys absorbed in a game of cards, and how she suggested that she should play one of the men's hands while he went out to post her letter; how on another occasion she found her servants stealing the choicest fruits from her table and said to them: "This must not happen again. And now be off with you before the major-domo catches you!"; how on a journey she refused to eat until she had been assured that there was enough food for all the servants . . .

Whoever was her friend was also her brother, but—was she really concerned with the Rights of Man? Was she the philosopher who respected every fellow-creature as an equal, or the woman who, despite her age and her station was anxious to charm everyone with whom she came in contact, irrespective of their age and sex? She could never tolerate seeing dissatisfied or indifferent faces about her; her desire for human warmth was as persistent as her feminine power of inspiring it in those with whom she came in contact. Time had made her first a mother, then a grandmother, and her manner toward people always remained faintly that of a grown-up dealing with children. She herself had experienced both the exhilaration that comes of conscious power and the paralysing effect of discouragement; she was always generous in giving praise and very sparing of blame. She believed in the essential goodness of individual human beings and invariably addressed herself to that goodness when dealing with individuals.

But she could not apply the same principle to her dealings with humanity at large—particularly her dealings with the people. An army of unscrupulous adventurers, bloodsuckers, sadists, or plain fools, stood between her and them. She was aware of this, and she could do nothing to change it, yet in spite of it she blamed the people for showing those very qualities which centuries of exploitation were bound to instil in them. As early as 1784 she wrote to Grimm: "The fruits of progress are everywhere in evidence; in science, in the arts, even in nature

herself—only mankind remains unchanged.” She had come to the conclusion that the French philosophers were mistaken on one point: namely, in their faith in the innate goodness and justice of mankind as a whole.

She was in this pessimistic frame of mind when news of the French Revolution reached her. Her attitude was instantly determined; she was more blindly and bitterly antagonistic to the Revolution than any other European ruler, though she was the first to realize the full danger of the threatening storm. She had always disapproved of the frivolity of the French king and queen; ten years before she had written to her ambassador in Paris that Marie Antoinette’s irresponsibility and Louis’s senseless extravagance, which must infuriate the hungry nation, were intensely displeasing to her. She advised the French king to try and set the confusion of his country in order, to find employment for competent men like Lafayette and Neckar instead of forcing their unsatisfied ambition to seek an outlet in Frondist activities, to travel and call meetings of the deputies so that he might learn more of the real conditions of the country and the temper of his people—in a word, so long as the king exercised a royal prerogative he should, in Catherine’s opinion, make use of his autocratic powers to keep the people happy and contented. Yet the moment this autocratic power was threatened, the moment the people attempted to defy their king, Catherine ranged herself wholeheartedly on the side of Louis, taking it for granted that he would crush these first stirrings of insubordination without mercy or restraint, “for thus anarchy begins.” Her attitude was not inconsistent, it was the logical outcome of the theory of rational absolutism which she had learned from Voltaire.

It was some time before the French became aware of it. The National Assembly still believed that in the friend of the Encyclopædists they could count on a sympathizer, not knowing that Catherine was indignant at what she considered to be the arrogant tone adopted by this assembly, and was recommending Louis to start a foreign war and hang a few members of the Convention instead of entering into cowardly negotiations with

them. Grimm sent her a picture of Bailly and asked for her own portrait to give him in exchange. "It is as little fitting for the major-domo of a kingless palace to possess the portrait of the most aristocratic Empress of Europe," she wrote back, "as it is for the Empress *aristocratisime* to gaze upon the portrait of a rebel." Ségur, who had originally been sent to Petersburg because his liberal opinions coincided with those of the Empress, and who had remained on excellent terms with Catherine for over ten years, was dismissed when she read his private correspondence and learned that the storming of the Bastille had filled him with a profound satisfaction. "Je suis aristocrate, c'est mon métier," she said to him at parting.

She regarded the new movement in France with horror, yet she was able to foretell its development with uncanny accuracy. When the title "King of France" was taken from Louis and "King of the French" substituted, Catherine promptly remarked: "They will string their king up on a *lanterne* next!" She could do nothing to stop the execution of the French royal family, though she sent them false passports for their flight through the daughter of a Russian banker, but when the heads of the unfortunate Capets rolled into the basket and the population of Paris gave itself over to frenzied and drunken celebration of their newly-won liberty, Catherine prophesied: "They will soon weary of this liberty and then they will become as gentle and obedient as lambs. But a clever and courageous leader is needed, one who is far in advance of his fellow-men and his age. A new Genghis Khan will arise. Does this man already exist? Will he soon appear?"

Catherine was no passive spectator to judge living events with impartial fairness; she could not see the greatness of an idea divorced from the human imperfections of its exponents, or the idealistic aims behind a movement apart from the violent passions of its followers. She was forced by her character and her position to make swift decisions and to act on them immediately. The French Revolution to her was a sober political reality, and as such represented a threat to the legitimist tradition in Europe. No one was more susceptible to such a

threat than Catherine, for the very reason that she herself was a usurper. Only this can explain the almost morbid hatred she showed during her later years for any expression of liberal ideas. All Russians living in France were ordered to leave the plague-spot and to return home immediately, while all French nationals domiciled in Russia were made to swear a solemn oath of loyalty to the royalist tradition. French *émigrés* were welcomed with open arms, their support cost the public exchequer something like two million roubles, and before long Catherine was complaining. "These people expect roasted pigeons to fly into their mouths; they are full of fine phrases but in truth butter does not melt in their mouths." Nevertheless "these people" managed to obtain control of the official Petersburg newspaper, which gradually took on the character of a periodical anti-Jacobin pamphlet, an epic poem commemorating the exploits of the French aristocracy. French newspapers were still allowed to circulate freely among their Russian subscribers, most of whom belonged to the nobility. Catherine felt that the natural repugnance of this class for mob rule could only be intensified by detailed and first-hand reports. She made no attempt to censor the Press until the *Moniteur* printed an article ridiculing the Grand Duke Paul, which Catherine feared might endanger the prestige of the royal family, but she raised the ban on the same paper when it published a sharp attack on herself. "That concerns me alone," she said, as if she herself were superior to the abstract idea of majesty, a being immune from slander.

In the past Catherine had always deprecated criticism of the government, but she had usually suffered it with patience, and had always tried to use reason rather than force as a weapon to fight those who resisted her fascination. Novikov, the most gifted and courageous editor of his day, annoyed her by repeated attacks in his paper, *The Wasp*; Catherine immediately established a rival paper in which, under a *nom de plume*, she could retaliate to her heart's content. *The Wasp* was afterwards suppressed, but in recognition of Novikov's services in the cause of public enlightenment—he had founded the first

lending libraries in Russia and originated the scheme of printing good books in cheap editions to be sold in the provinces—Catherine engaged him as her editor, and for a time they published a newspaper together. The Princess Dashkov's newspaper meanwhile had opened its columns to a controversy between readers and the editorial staff, and for months the public had no inkling that their questions were being answered by the Empress herself. Sometimes, when these questions proved too rash, they were dismissed with a short, severe reply; nevertheless the fact that a free exchange of opinions was permitted was an evidence of exceptional broad-mindedness at that period. Catherine's tolerance in religious matters extended as far as was compatible with her position as head of the Greek Church, and as far as it could go without offending the bishops. In practice everyone in Russia was allowed to hold whatever religious beliefs he chose. Far from attempting to convert the Mohammedans in the conquered provinces of the Crimea, Catherine had built new mosques for them; she offered the Jesuits a refuge at Mohilev after their order had been broken up, she tolerated the Catholics in White Russia, the Protestants in the Baltic provinces, as well as the Raskolniks and countless other religious sects, and every year on the sixth of January, as a sign that all creeds could claim her equal protection, a so-called "toleration banquet" was given, a ceremonious feast at which priests from every church in Russia attended and were treated by the Empress with impartial favour.

Catherine's recantation of her theories was entirely incidental, it was the by-product of a very sensible realization that she needed new, or rather the old, worn-out convictions, because she had grown unsure of herself. She had discovered that even the paper on which philosophers wrote did not invariably prove patient, that it was liable to burst into flames and set fire to everything around it. She had ranged herself on the side of Reason, Humanity, Progress, had, in brief, supported the revolutionary thought of her day—as Frederick the Great and Joseph II had done, only they were fortunate enough to die before they were compelled to act as she did—but she had

supported these doctrines only so long as they remained the purely intellectual concern of the aristocracy, having their existence only on paper. When the French mob expressed that thought in terms of action which Catherine could only regard as treasonable, she began an inglorious campaign against the printed word. Raditchev, who in his *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow* had exposed the corruptibility of Russian officialdom, the flaws in the system of patrimonial jurisdiction, and above all the horrors of serfdom, roused her not only to the polemic retort of *Antidote*—he was tried, sentenced to death, and finally had his sentence commuted to one of life-long banishment. Even more grotesque was the sentence of fifteen years imprisonment in the Schlüsselburg which Catherine passed on her former collaborator, Novikov, for the crime of distributing the same "revolutionary" works which she herself had once paid large yearly sums to have translated. Novikov also happened to be Master of the Moscow Lodge of Freemasons and a leader of the Martinists. Catherine had never approved of the Freemasons (how could she approve of an institution that barred women from its membership?), she considered these "massons" to be merely charlatans or simpletons, laughed at their strange ritual, and wrote no less than three comedies in which she held them up to ridicule. Yet she had tolerated them as scornfully as she had tolerated the various other mystic orders with which they were connected. But now all that was changed; Catherine suspected everyone. When she heard that the Jacobin leaders were Freemasons, all Freemasons automatically became Jacobins as far as she was concerned, and since a number of Freemasons were also Martinists, these too automatically became Jacobins. Their Lodges were closed, their printing presses smashed, quantities of suspect literature were burned, and the law, embodied in the pompous person of police inspector Proserodski, invaded the inner sanctum, where an investigation was held in the course of which confessions were extracted under threat of the knout, and free thought was stamped into proper subjection by the boots of authority.

Considering the enormous distance between France and

Russia these precautions seemed unnecessary, and Catherine's apprehension incomprehensible unless it is viewed as a deliberate policy. She had her own reasons for exaggerating the Jacobin peril. She would not have been the old Catherine if she had not immediately tried to find some way by which Russia might profit from the French situation. France had withdrawn from the European struggle for supremacy, being too much occupied with her own affairs, which at the same time were causing great concern to the rest of the world. Turkey, abandoned by her most powerful ally, and unable to find support elsewhere at this critical moment, was forced to hand over the whole of the northern coast of the Black Sea to Russia by the Treaty of Jassy. The next move in the game was the second, and finally the third, partition of Poland. The French Revolution seemed to have woken a sympathetic echo in the Polish protest against Russian tyranny which was expressed in the new Constitution of May 1791; Catherine, at any rate, established the association and made it an excuse for sending her troops to march into Poland. The thought of annexing yet another portion of this unhappy country fanned her reactionary activities to a white heat. She sent impassioned memoranda to all the Courts of Europe urging them to unite in making war on the Jacobins. "I advise all Powers to adopt the Greek faith in order to safeguard themselves against this criminal, anarchistic, devilish epidemic . . ." For a moment she visualized a European crusade of legitimacy under her own leadership, but these were fevered dreams. She confided her real political plans to her secretary, Crapovotski: "I wish to keep Berlin and Vienna occupied, so that I may have free elbow space. Do you understand me? There are certain plans I wish to complete and I do not want to be distracted." She did not send a single soldier against the French revolutionaries, she was ostensibly too busy suppressing Jacobinism in Poland. While the Prussians were suffering defeat in the Champagne and the Austrians in Belgium, Suvarov made a triumphal entry into Warsaw and forced Stanislaus into a betrayal of his country and a complete surrender to Russia. Frederick William of Prussia had guaranteed Polish

independence, and Leopold II had every reason to desire it, but since the cost of their lost campaigns could only be covered by a fresh looting of Poland the first was ready to break his word and the second to change his views.

But Catherine was still unsatisfied, her "plans" were not yet completed. The older she grew, the more fierce and undisguised her lust for conquest became. She never ceased to stir up the fires of hatred against France. She laid the sudden death of the Austrian Emperor and the murder of Gustav of Sweden at the door of the Jacobins, and declared that her own life was in constant danger from assassins sent by the villainous Robespierre. She denounced the Court of Berlin because it negotiated with "murderers and rebels," and fulminated against the Treaty of Basle. "To sign treaties with the murderers of kings is deliberately to encourage fresh murderers," she wrote. When Austria, too, was ready to come to terms with France she referred contemptuously to the "Jacobin toadeaters" and remained firm in her insistence that the French should be dealt with as her Generals had dealt with the Pugachev robber-hordes—any man who offered armed resistance should instantly be shot. Twenty thousand Cossacks, she declared, would be sufficient to bring the rebels to their senses and to restore the French monarchy.

But she sent neither Cossacks nor Generals to France. She proceeded to stamp out the last flicker of patriotism in Poland, by suppressing Kosziosko's rebellion. She was bitterly attacked for this because Kosziosko, who was bent on saving his country from being completely carved up, was a man of disinterested motives and a popular national hero. To Catherine, however, he was simply a rebel and doubly dangerous in such times as these, when all Europeans who had nothing to gain from the *ancien régime* were on the side of the revolutionaries. Her indignation was genuine enough, even if she was thankful to have a reason for it. Her troops occupied the country in the sacred name of order; Stanislaus, who had proved himself too weak to maintain order, was forced to renounce his throne, and, in the sacred name of order, Poland was erased from the map of

Europe as an independent country. Catherine had taken the precaution of delving into past history, and she was able, with the eloquence of a defending counsel, to assure all those who suffered from qualms of conscience that in annexing Volhynia and Podolia she had not seized one inch of territory that did not belong to Russia by ancient rights. The extinction of Poland automatically solved the problem of Courland, which had been a Polish dependency. A small regiment was able to overthrow the son of the dead Biron and to turn Courland into a Russian province, thus legalizing a position which had existed in practice for the past three hundred years.

These numerous annexations had naturally involved complicated negotiations with the neighbouring powers, Prussia and Austria. There was endless haggling over every acre of ground, and since political arguments are only effective when reinforced by a regiment of soldiers, both Prussia and Austria found it necessary to withdraw a large section of their troops from the Western front and send them to occupy Poland. The suspicion and vigilance with which the three legitimist powers pursued their campaign of annexation in the East, each striving to overreach the other, was not the only reason for their failure to subdue France. It is a paradox not without poetic justice that Catherine, who had urged Europe to make war on the French Republicans so that she might pursue her Polish conquests undisturbed, had, by rousing the envy of her neighbours, disrupted the activities of the reactionary opposition and so constituted herself the guardian angel of the French Revolution.

At the age of fifty-six she had achieved the dream of Peter the Great: she had become mistress of the Baltic and the Black Sea, and had expanded the frontiers of Russia far into the West. She had every reason to be satisfied and to rest from her labours, but that was a thing she could not do. Age had mellowed nothing in her, least of all her ambition.

"If I could live to be a hundred," she said to Diershavin, "I should wish to unite the whole of Europe under the sceptre of Russia. But I have no intention of dying before I have driven

the Turks out of Constantinople, broken the pride of the Chinese, and established trade relations with India."

She had no intention of dying. Life had so far granted all her desires, and she believed that so long as she still had desires it would be impossible for her to die. Like a confirmed gambler her persistent luck made her believe that she had mastered the secret laws of fate and could impose her will on the stars.

She hated death and refused to think about it, not because of that metaphysical fear of the unknown which had clutched at Potiomkin's throat, but because she loved life. She clung to it with all the passionate strength of her sensual nature, she felt at home in the world, her reactions to life were positive, she responded to its challenges with a vigorous "Yes!" She knew how to take all that life offered and to savour it to the full—all save the ultimate experience of death. That she could not include in her scheme of things.

She resisted the infirmities of advancing age without any apparent effort. She refused to let herself relax, and indeed she seemed to have no need of relaxation. She loved her responsibilities; their colourful variety was thoroughly congenial to her temperament, she was equal to shouldering them all, from the heaviest to the most frivolous. She began work at six o'clock in the morning. Since it had become somewhat painful for her to stoop and kneel she no longer lit her own fire in the chimney, but she spent the early morning hours alone at her desk, writing "until her hand was seized with cramp," or until the two new quill pens which were laid out for her every day were blunted. She wrote letters to her friends abroad, memoirs, political articles, and comedies. She adored writing, and wrote with the same passionate concentration she gave to everything she did. She might affect a false modesty regarding her literary activities, and refer to them as "a vice," but actually she had a very high opinion of her own talent. When she had had enough of writing, the real day's work began; her secretaries, ministers and Generals arrived. The Empress's audiences were entirely informal; she would appear with a loose jacket thrown over her dressing-gown, a soft pleated cap on her

hair, and spectacles on her nose; her visitors were invited to sit down, and she had a kind word for everyone. She never kept people waiting. She was always busy, but never flustered. She continued working with short breaks until two o'clock. In the afternoon she would read incoming despatches and send off the couriers. Meanwhile she found time to dress, to have her hair arranged, to dine, see her grandchildren, read a book, do some needlework, and play a game of billiards.

She had various methods of fighting old age. Her strenuous daily routine was one. Laughter was another. She had always placed a high value on mirth, and in time it grew to be part of her philosophy of life. Anyone who could make her laugh was sure of her favour, for she would pardon him a hundred faults. Catherine's own laughter was healthy and robust, loud and full-throated. Her famous guffaws were always invoked either by a very innocent or a very obscene joke, never by humour of a suggestive kind. She was convulsed with equally hearty laughter over Voltaire's *Pucelle* and Leo Narychkin's trick of waggling his wig. Catherine herself could waggle her right ear, and she was extremely proud of this accomplishment. "Madame, you must be gay," she wrote to Frau Bielke; "only thus can life be endured. I speak from experience, for I have had to endure much, and I have only been able to endure it because I have always laughed whenever I had the occasion." She still had occasions for laughter, for even in her old age she was as easily amused as a child. At the intimate gatherings in the Hermitage, which during the last years of Catherine's life took place almost every evening, her guests amused themselves with charades and games of forfeit that were almost unbelievably childish: the penalty for one player would be to drink a glass of water, another was made to recite a passage from the *Tele-machus* without yawning, Catherine herself had to sit on the floor to retrieve her forfeit—all of which made her laugh so uproariously that her sides ached.

"Fifty years ago to-day," Catherine wrote to Grimm, "I arrived in Moscow with my mother. I do not believe there are ten people here who remember that day. There is Betski,

half blind, worn out, almost in his second childhood; the Countess Matushkin, who at seventy-eight danced at the wedding feast yesterday; the Master of Ceremonies, Narychkin, and his brother, the Master of the Stables—though the latter may deny it, fearing to admit his age; Shuvalov, who is so feeble that he can hardly leave his house; an old waiting woman . . . these, my friend, are the most convincing proof of old age. But what is one to do? In spite of everything I am as eager as a five-year-old child to play blind-man's buff, and the young people, my grandchildren and great-grandchildren, say that their games are never so merry as when I play with them. In a word, I am their merry-maker . . .”

This complacent self-portrait of a vigorous old lady who defeated the terrors of age by retaining the warm-hearted enthusiasms of her youth is by no means flattered: it is merely incomplete. As Catherine grew older her passionate love for children increased, and not only for those of her own family. She adopted half a dozen strange children, so that she was able to interrupt her work at any moment of the day and refresh herself with innocent fun. She loved animals, above all, dogs. Her English physician, Dr. Dimsdale, had once given her a pair of greyhounds who gave birth to a litter of puppies in her bedroom and founded the noble breed of Russian greyhounds. Catherine looked after the animals herself; she would always leave whatever she was doing to get up and let the dogs out into the garden, and she studied their characters and habits with passionate interest. When she walked in the park of Czarskoe Selo her dogs always trotted at her heels, and if she fell into pessimistic musings about the nature of mankind, the dogs were able to restore her faith in creation. She also kept a little white squirrel which Potiomkin had given her; she fed it on nuts, and marvelled at the antics of this “most beautiful, merry, and friendly of cats.” Another of her pets was a small monkey which could cheer her even in her most despondent moods by stroking her with its tiny hands. One of her most regular habits was to throw open her window at ten o'clock on every winter morning and scatter crumbs to hundreds of half-starved

ravens. She loved flowers, not merely for their beauty; every spring she was seized with a gardening fever, an urge to plant, and to lay out new flower-beds. She loved all weak and dumb things, and this outflowing tenderness saved her from hypochondria and its attendant ills and bound her a thousand times more closely to the world.

It is possible to love life in a variety of ways, and Catherine, as she grew older, learnt to love it in all of them. She reached out towards the serene, mental pleasures of maturity without relinquishing her grasp on the familiar, consuming joys of youth. Indeed she had never been more blindly, madly in love than now when she was forced to betray the accumulated wisdom of her years in order to condone the folly of her still youthful heart.

Age must inevitably pay more dearly for folly than youth. When a woman of sixty-seven falls in love with the impetuosity of a half-grown girl she cannot expect her surrender to be the sole price of bliss. The Empress of Russia was rich enough to buy not only her happiness but the illusion that it had been freely given. These illusions proved expensive. Plato Zubov was exacting in his demands. He did not ask for presents, he asked for power and influence, he wanted all that Potiomkin had had and more besides. Catherine gave him whatever he asked, not merely out of doting weakness; she tried to persuade herself that Zubov was a genius, a truly great man whom she was advancing according to his merits, and that his love-making was not a repayment for her kindness but a spontaneous gesture, born of mutual attraction. She could proudly say that she gave him no money—he drew his income from the treasury, and squandered more in seven years than Potiomkin had done in twenty. The "child" (he might easily have been Catherine's grandson) held thirteen of the most important positions in the country. Though he had never won a battle, or even seen any fighting, he was appointed Inspector-General of the entire Russian army; though he had never set foot in them he was created Governor of the new Russian provinces; though he had no knowledge, training, or experience, he handled the most

delicate matters, dismissed and appointed ministers of state, commanded the sun to shine and the rain to fall. He was the autocrat of the autocratic Empress, he ruled Russia. He possessed none of the qualities of a ruler which, in Catherine's eyes, justified absolute power. He was probably no better and no worse than a thousand others of this type, an average army officer, quite unsuited to shoulder the moral responsibilities of power. It was only natural that to maintain the position he had achieved entirely without merit of his own, he should seek the support of friends who in turn had no merit save that of being his friends. Within a few years all the key positions in Russia were held by Zubov's creatures, men of servile disposition who sang his praises and enriched themselves shamelessly by doing so. The corruptibility and greed of the higher officials which had hitherto been an unavoidable evil became a national institution under Zubov.

"I know of no one who showed greater talents at your age," Catherine wrote to her "little black boy"—and she really believed this. She was blind to his faults, and who was prepared to open her eyes to them? Who cared more for her reputation and the good of the country than for his own advancement? The men who had dared to protest against Zubov had long since been deprived of their positions and banished from the Court. Those who hoped for a brighter future sought the company of the future Emperor, the Grand Duke Paul, and for this reason were hated and suspected by the aged Empress. She was surrounded by people who, partly to curry favour with Zubov, partly because they valued their own peace, assured her over and over again that things in Russia were better than they had ever been. And yet there was plenty for Catherine to see if she had not chosen to remain blind. She might, for instance, have asked how it was that officials whose salaries were no more than a few hundred roubles a month were able to build large houses in Petersburg; and if she had chosen to investigate the matter further she would have discovered that these officials were in charge of public funds. But she made no investigations. She was delighted by the expansion of her capital, which she

regarded as a sign of healthy and increasing prosperity. She believed all these things because she needed to believe them for the sake of her own peace and happiness.

She had never been so avid for happiness, so determined to sacrifice all that she had and was to the pleasure of the moment, as now when her failing eyesight, her lapses of memory, the sudden missing of a heart beat, reminded her of hated old age and inevitable death. She wanted life, life without end! When icy shudders at the thought of an eternity of loneliness ran down her spine it was not the children, not the dogs and the birds, not even the thought of immortal fame that brought back warmth to her frozen veins. Her flesh, unhealthy though it was, could still burn with a wild excitement. Could one be old when young kisses had the power to stir one's blood more hotly even than it had been stirred in youth? Could one die while one was still capable of demanding, enjoying and absorbing life in its most compelling manifestation?

Catherine had never before abandoned herself to debauchery. She had had a dozen lovers, but while the relationship lasted she had been to all intents and purposes monogamously married to each one of them. Five years before, during her celebrated Crimean trip, she had reprimanded Ségur for reciting a risky poem in her presence, though it was one which was freely quoted at Versailles. Now she had a secret closet adjoining her bedroom that was plastered from floor to ceiling with lascivious miniatures. Age has need of sharper stimulants, and Plato Zubov was able to fire his mistress's sluggish but insatiable passions with endless new sensations. He arranged private gatherings in the secret closet; his brother Valerian, his friend Peter Saltykov, a few intimates of Catherine shared the secret of the poisoned well from which her painted lips believed they drank an elixir of youth, though in fact this indulgence merely hastened her end.

The distressing thing about this sexual mania on the part of a stout and toothless old woman—apart from any moral or æsthetic objections—was the fact that it was bound to strike people as an "unnatural" condition. It certainly appeared

unnatural to Catherine's contemporaries, and, like everything they could not understand in a woman, they called it hysteria. But we cannot accept this explanation in view of the mental vigour and alertness which Catherine retained to the day of her death, or regard her excessive sensuality as an isolated phenomenon having no relation to her otherwise normal character, since her sexual indulgences did not exhaust but rather stimulated and refreshed her. She herself felt everything she did to be entirely "natural." And yet, how can we define the "natural" and "normal" except by custom? We are accustomed to regard elderly women, once they have lost their physical beauty, as devoid of sexual desire, but we cannot know whether this lack of desire is a law of nature or the result of many discouraging rebuffs: the imagination will not venture where it fears to encounter humiliating defeat, and finally the life of the senses falls into decay. Catherine, however, had no need to fear rebuffs. Wherever her tottering footsteps took her, she was surrounded by dozens of handsome opportunists who fed the unquenchable flame of her desire with amorous glances and gestures. Must she continually remind herself that their advances could not possibly be inspired by her shapeless, sagging body? She had grown expert at self-deception, but this in itself is nothing very unusual. Countless wealthy and respected men past the prime of life have the same happy gift for ignoring truths which might otherwise spoil the raptures of a senile idyll. And Catherine's attitude to life was not that of an elderly woman, but of an elderly man. Seventy years of feminine autocracy had completely reversed the rôles of the sexes at the Russian Court. Catherine had assumed the responsibilities of a man and a ruler, and had fulfilled them for thirty-four years: she had earned the right to be excused the weaknesses of a great man. Like other great men, she overlooked her own lack of physical attraction in seeking to satisfy her erotic desires; like other great men she cherished the ephemeral hope of being able to inspire physical love for the sake of her spiritual qualities; like other great men she allowed herself to be deceived into believing

the crude but infinitely comforting lies of any quick-witted little courtesan.

It was an ironical coincidence that at the very moment when the immorality of the French Court had given the revolutionary element its most powerful weapon of attack, the leader of the legitimist opposition should, without being aware of it, parade the inevitable evils of autocracy before the eyes of an attentive world.

Catherine still began work at six every morning, however fiercely she had loved the night before. Her iron self-discipline took no account of those ardours which would have concerned no one but herself if she had been a private individual, or if the companion of her lust had reflected her own virtues of industry and benevolence. But there was no such companion except in Catherine's imagination—she was surrounded by vain and shabby parasites.

At an hour when Catherine's hand was "seized with cramp," Plato Zubov still slept sweetly, and not one of the high dignitaries who thronged the ante-room would have dared to disturb the great man's slumber. Old and worthy men vied with each other for the honour of preparing his morning coffee and taking it to his bedside; sometimes they were rewarded with a "Good morning"; never with a word of thanks. When the pretty boy slipped from between his silken sheets and into his silk dressing-gown, the doors of the dressing-room were thrown open and a circle of awed men stood round while he allowed his fine brown hair to be combed and powdered. Some of them had waited months to be noticed and asked their business, others had no favours to ask but attended these morning rituals simply to remind the favourite of their devoted existence. The shameless arrogance of this super-gigolo was only exceeded by the shameless servility of his friends. Zubov had a little monkey that took a delight in pulling the powdered hair of his visitors: not only did nobody dare to check the little animal's tricks, some even tried to attract its attention by wearing their hair conspicuously dressed, hoping thereby to win a smile from the haughty lips of its master.

Of this also Catherine remained in ignorance. While she was attacking the French rebels, and striving to purge the morals of the legitimists so that they should not commit those sins which had cost the Bourbons their throne, inside her own palace her own lover was doing his best to outrival the example set by the Dubarry and the Pompadour, and by his presumption, his nepotic ambition, his failure to make a success of any enterprise he was entrusted with, was bringing discredit on Catherine's government and ruining the work she was trying to do.

In spite of Russia's many conquests and her Polish acquisitions, the treasury was in lower water than it had ever been before. Zubov engaged an expert to work out a scheme for the liquidation of the national debt, and then copied it out word for word in his own handwriting, to make it appear that he was the author. But whoever invented the scheme, it was never used. On the other hand, Zubov had no difficulty in persuading the Empress to engage in a new war against Persia. Jealous of Potiomkin's reputation, he had worked out an ambitious plan for conquering all territory as far as Tibet, and striking a fatal blow at Turkey from the East. Russia succeeded in annexing the province of Baku, though the advantages of this victory were not to become apparent until much later, with the growing importance of petrol to a later day and age. After this encouraging beginning, the war had suddenly to be abandoned because of the appalling state of the troops. The vast allowances which had been made for maintaining the army had found their way into various greasy palms. Zubov had become a Cæsus, his generals millionaires, every army commander was a rich man, but the soldiers were ragged and half-starved, and the ammunition had given out. Catherine's Turkish plans had once more to be postponed.

Zubov also succeeded in wrecking another pet plan of hers: the marriage of her granddaughter to the young King of Sweden. The question of religious differences presented certain difficulties, but these might easily have been overcome by mutual agreement, if Zubov had not preferred to use the methods of a dishonest agent. He let both parties believe that everything had been

arranged according to their wishes, and at the last moment, when Catherine and the whole Court were assembled to celebrate the engagement, he presented the young Swedish king with a marriage document in which only the interests of Russia had been consulted. Zubov felt certain that the youthful king would not dare oppose the all-powerful Empress. He had been surrounded by sycophants and flatterers for so long that he had forgotten there were real men in the world. Gustav acted like a man, he refused to sign the document, and after waiting three hours for the bridegroom to appear, the puzzled guests dispersed. Catherine had experienced defeat in many forms, but not once during her career as an Empress had she met with a personal affront of this kind. It took all her pride to hide her deep chagrin from those who witnessed her humiliation.

But she did not reproach Zubov. She never reproached him for anything. He was still a child, she could teach him all the things he needed to learn. She was firmly convinced that she was educating him, when in fact she was merely spoiling him. She was also convinced that she had ample time at her disposal, another twenty years at least. She suffered agonies from varicose veins, that sometimes burst and made each step she took a torture, but she wrote to Grimm: "I feel as agile as a water-wagtail." There was still so much for her to do which death must not be allowed to interrupt. She firmly believed that Fate was on her side; Fate would not allow her to die before she had completed her various missions in life.

First and foremost there was the question of the succession to be settled. Catherine knew her son. As a mother, she might have been expected to show patience with his faults, but as the Empress she only realized the terrible danger that threatened Russia under the domination of a gifted but definitely pathological Czar. Paul must not be allowed to succeed her, the throne must pass directly from her to her grandson, Alexander. But this for the moment was no easy matter to arrange. Was the leader of the legitimist party to remind a world of revolutionaries that she herself was a usurper? Was she, who for the last ten years had been preaching the divine right

of kings, to interrupt the legitimate succession in her own country by an act of violence? It was the worst possible moment for tampering with the none too stainless record of the Russian dynasty.

Catherine believed there was still plenty of time left to her. The French storm would pass, and she would have done her share in allaying it. Once again her voice dominated the European chorus; she demanded a new coalition, called on England, Prussia and Austria to unite, promised to send a hundred and fifty thousand soldiers to quell the French rabble, and threatened not only to close her frontiers should any attempt be made to conciliate the common enemy but to break off diplomatic relations with Europe. She felt strong enough to defy the whole continent; she believed it was her mission to save Europe—and to rule it.

Her troops were to advance in December. The whole country was arming at high pressure, soldiers were being conscripted, one man out of every hundred was requisitioned for the invading army, the troops had already begun to march towards the frontier across the boundless Samatian steppes, and Suvarov, the real hero of the Turkish Wars, was impatient to measure his strength against that of the Corsican general whose curious name had for the past few months evoked the scorn, anger, or admiration of all Europe. Suvarov was a pious man. He prayed to the Holy Virgin of Kazan, and to his Little Mother Catherine. He kissed her picture wherever he happened to find it—on the miniatures, for example, which the Court ladies wore on their breasts. When he visited the Empress he would fall on his knees first before the ikon, then before Catherine—each time with his forehead touching the ground. "For Heaven's sake!" Catherine would exclaim. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" His ambition for years had been to fight the French. All his letters to Catherine ended with the words: "Mother, let me march against the French!" Suvarov was a lunatic, but he was a magnificent General: there is no telling what victories he might have won if he had been allowed to march against Bonaparte then. But

the Holy Virgin of Kazan willed otherwise. The day the news of Napoleon's victory at Arcole reached Petersburg—the 16th November 1796—Catherine died.

She died a happier death than had been granted to any other Russian monarch. She died with an innocent, carefree laugh on her lips. Leo Narychkin had conceived the idea of going to the Hermitage disguised as a hawker with a tray full of toys and trinkets. This trick which Narychkin played on the evening before the great offensive against France was due to be launched, made Catherine laugh so terribly that she was seized with a violent colic, and supported on the arm of Plato Zubov retired to bed earlier than usual. The next morning she received the satisfactory news of General Moreau's defeat, and wrote a humorous congratulatory despatch to Vienna. A few minutes later she fell from her chair unconscious. Her heart continued to beat for thirty-six hours—an hour for every year that she had sat upon the throne of Russia. She knew nothing of her own death agonies. Zubov closed her eyes.

All the people who had known her personally—her many friends, those who had worked with her, her servants, and waiting-women—wept bitterly. Beyond the frontiers kings and rebels drew a sigh of relief: she had excited the envy of the one and intimidated the other. Only the Russian people remained unmoved by her death. Inside her palace she had been a kind Little Mother, on the throne a victorious monarch, but the people themselves had benefited neither by her kindness nor her victories. She was not to blame. She had aspired to the best, and achieved the possible. The time factor was against her—for she lived in advance of her age. Circumstances had been too strong for her, therein lay her weakness, but she had recognized the force of circumstance and bowed to it, therein lay her greatness. Some of her contemporaries were destined to have a greater influence upon the future than Catherine, but none had a more positive affinity to their own day. She left the world no revolutionary ideas, her conquests had for the most part no lasting value, her writings

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are forgotten. All that she thought, did, and said, was remarkable only in relation to the living woman, to that strange creature whose unique mixture of intelligence and warm-heartedness, passion and greed, genius and fatalism, personified the waking vision of mankind. Her influence on the history of her day was great—the history of her life is greater, and undying.

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